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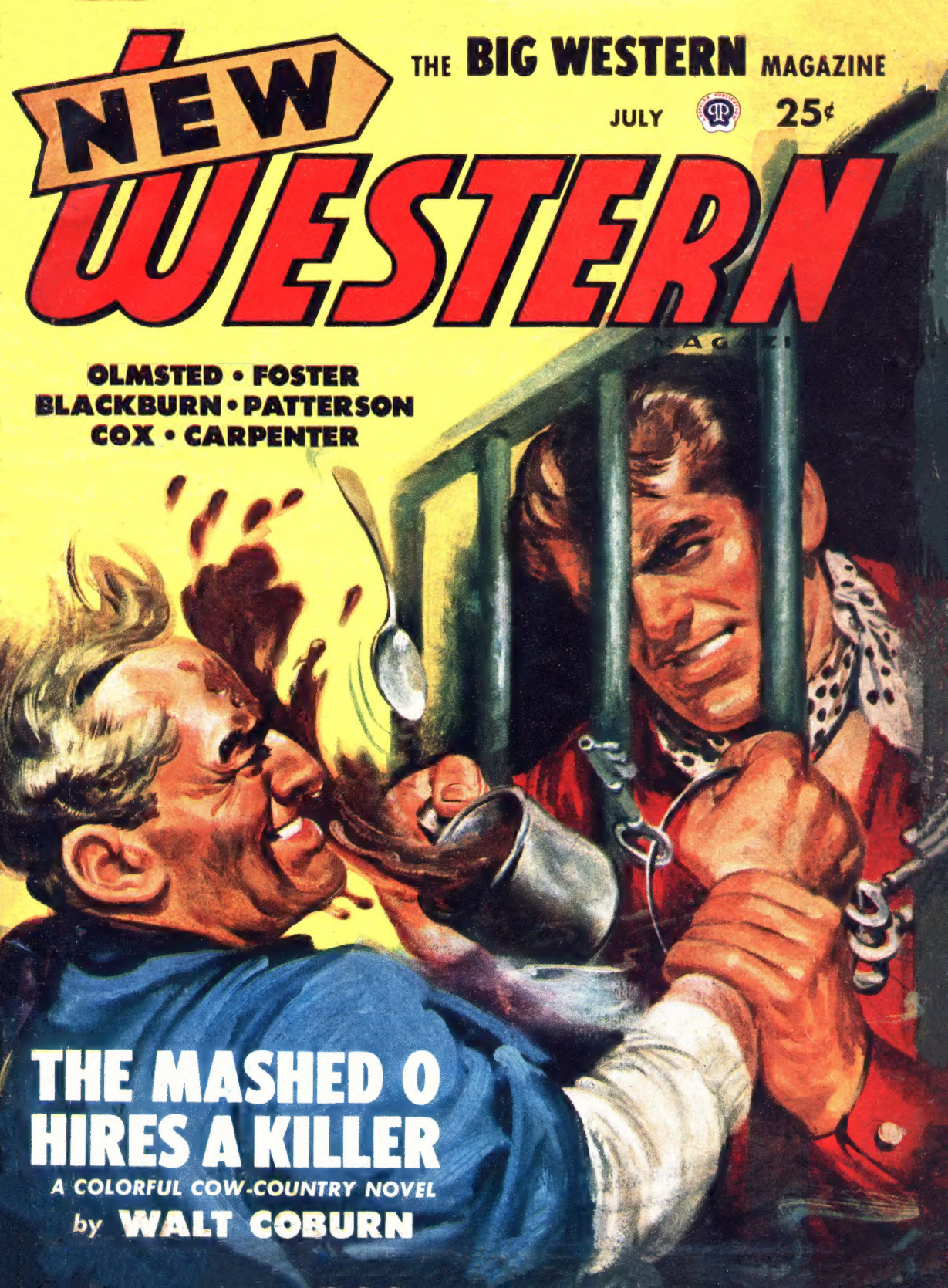

THE MASHED O HIRES A KILLER

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by WALT COBURN

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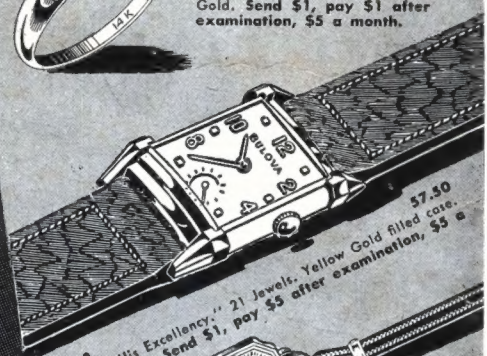

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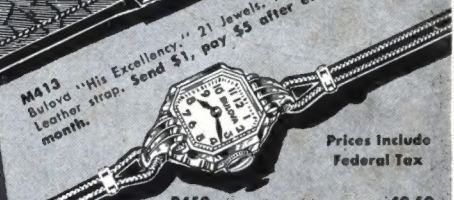

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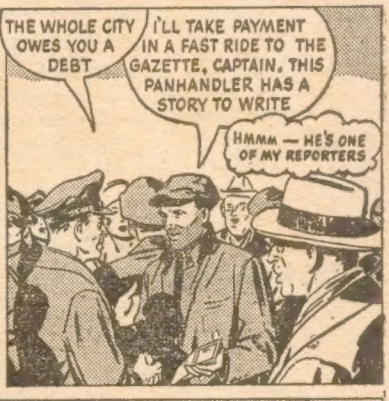
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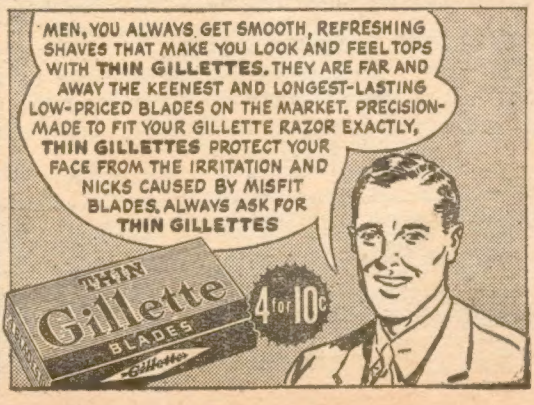
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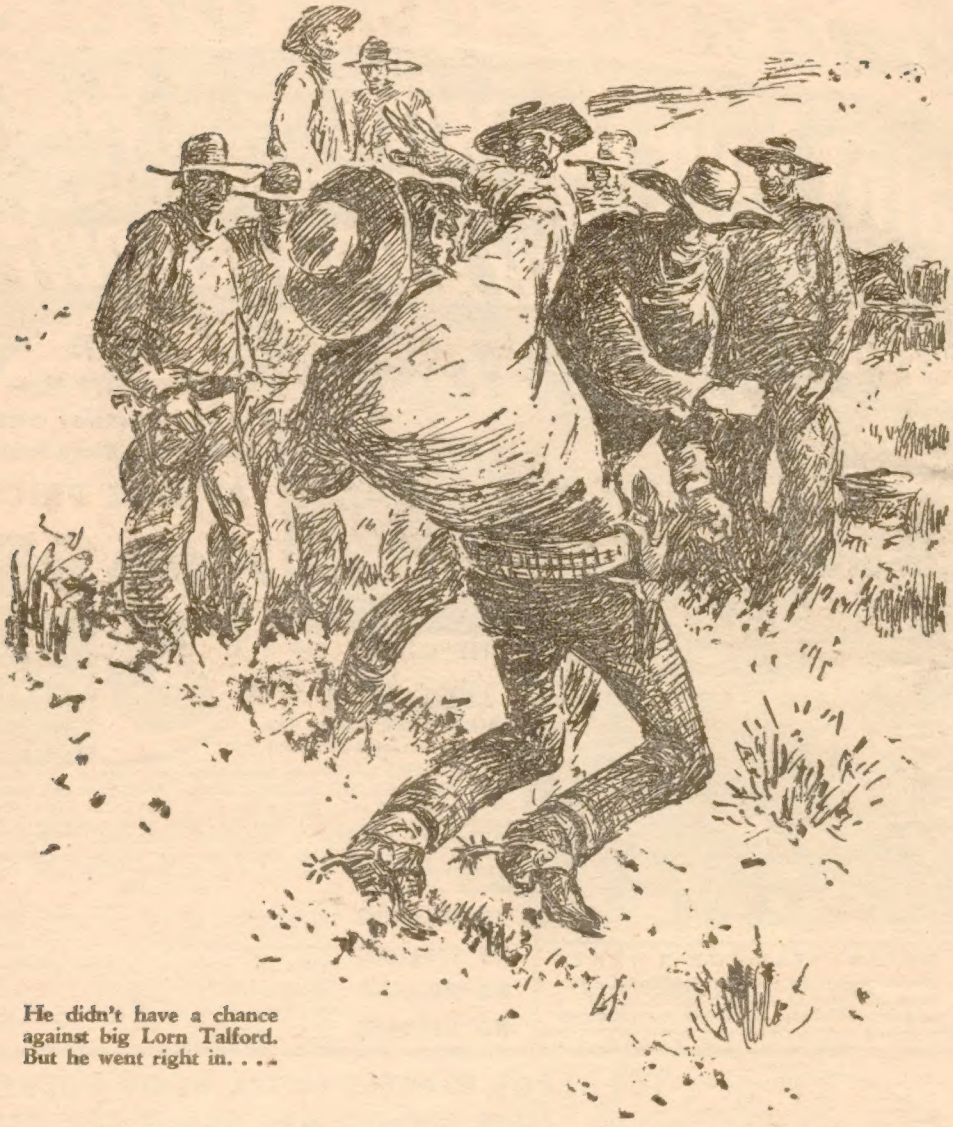
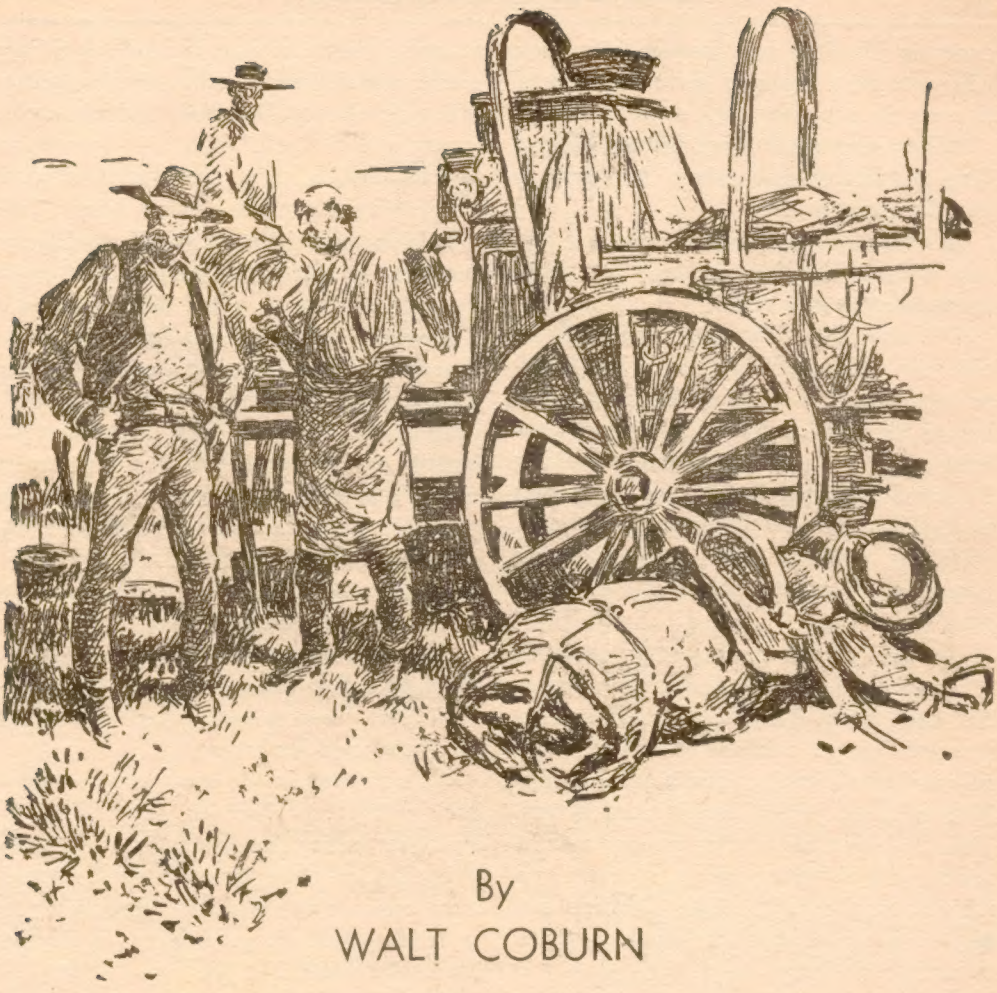


He didn't have a chance against big Lorn Talford. But he went right in. . . .

"You can't go home again, Bryan Williams. Ride the trails when the moon is black. Play it close to the belly. If there's a set-to, back down like a yellow-dog cur, and if there's a friend, slink away like a lobo. You got a long time to live—if you can stand that gut-shooting hombre you're riding with!"

THE MASHED O



By
WALT COBURN

CHAPTER ONE

The Man from Nowhere

HE LOOKED to be somewhere in his middle twenties when he hired out to the Mashed O outfit north of the Missouri River in eastern Montana for forty a month.

"Just put me down on the books as Bill Bryan." He had an easy grin on his wide mouth, but his blue-gray eyes were wary. "That's as good a name as any."

Old Man Matt Oliver made his own josh about it when he wrote the name

HIRES A KILLER

down in his little vest pocket tally book where he kept track of his cowpunchers' time on the roundup.

"Claim ary kin to Free Silver William Jennings Bryan that's givin' McKinley a race fer President?"

"I doubt if that gentleman would honor any claim of kinship made by a driftin' forty-a-month cowhand."

Old Man Matt Oliver wasn't actually an old man. Grizzled, in his fifties, thick-set and solid, he stood on widespread bowed legs and from under the slanted brim of the most disreputable looking Stetson in his big cow outfit, he had a habit of looking straight through a stranger with his whetted steel eyes while he gnawed at the ragged ends of his drooping gray mustache.

He saw a well-built young cowhand whose wide shoulders wedged down to a flat hard belly, lean flanks, and saddle-muscled legs; a cowboy with wiry black hair and blunt features and a pair of gray-blue eyes set under heavy black brows. The Old Man liked what he saw and he accepted this young cowhand then and there at his face value. The Old Man was a good judge of men, and he rarely had to change his first opinion.

The two were about the same height, a few inches under six feet. Their eyes met on a level and the eyes of the cowboy were wary but they did not flinch from the cowman's hard sharp scrutiny.

The Mashed O roundup was camped on Bull Creek at the head of the badlands when this stranger rode into camp from somewhere in the rough breaks. The Old Man was running his own wagon, but for the past year or two he had been gradually sitting back and taking things a little easier. His wife wanted him to enjoy the wealth he had built up at the Mashed O, and that was why he was handing over the actual ramrodding of the outfit to big Lorn Talford.

That was the reason the Old Man was at camp that morning instead of riding circle, roundsiding at camp, and swapping lies with Greasy Ben the roundup cook.

THE REMUDA was scattered and grazing not too far from camp. The Old Man told his newly hired cowboy to turn his saddle horse and packed bed-horse loose. It was while Bill Bryan was slipping the squaw hitch from his tarp-covered bed that Greasy Ben gave voice to his opinion. He was sot in his ways and once he declared himself, that gimpy-legged, ornery-tempered roundup cook couldn't be bribed, bullied or in any way made to change his opinion. Hell or high water or proven arguments to the contrary, Greasy Ben stuck to his opinion.

"That feller's on the dodge, Matt."

"If the governor of Montana rode up, you'd go lookin' fer snake tracks along his back trail. Tend to your pot rasslin'. You got sourdough fer brains."

"It's marked in his eye—way he looks back acrost his shoulder, coyote-like. I kin spot 'em as fur as I kin sight 'em. What'll you bet he turns his saddle horse loose right now before he gits a chance to size up them boys a-ridin' to change horses fer dinner?"

"You've et that spoiled grub of yourn too many years, and it's ruined your belly linin' an' plumb soured your disposition."

"All right. You're the man never made no mistake. You're the big dawg with the brass collar. Common cowhand like you gits his own iron, his opinion gits as true as the Bible. The law books of the United States and Montana kin be wrong, but the tally book in the pocket of Old Man Matt Oliver is correct as hell. Told yuh, by hell!"

The cowpuncher who called himself Bill Bryan had slipped his bed from his pack horse and turned the gelding loose to roll and graze. But he wasn't turning loose the buckskin horse. He loosened the front cinch and that was all. There was a car-

bine shoved in the saddle scabbard. He slid it free and leaned it against the front wheel of the chuck wagon. Then he came over to get a cup of coffee. Bill Bryan wasn't setting himself afoot, nor was he getting very far away from his saddle gun despite the fact he had a six-shooter buckled on.

"Mebbyso," the Old Man muttered, "you'd like fer the Mashed O to hire nothin' but Sunday school boys and a sky pilot to see that the Mashed O says their prayers. Is them raisins or horse-flies in that rice puddin' you're a-buildin'?"

"When you can't win a argument you haze it off on a side-trail. How ary man of your mistaken judgment ever got to own an iron, beats me. Comes from marryin' hisself a smart woman, I figger."

But it was Greasy Ben who told the stranger cowboy to grab hisself a plate and cup and eatin' hardware and get the wrinkles out of his belly. He said he'd show Bill Bryan where he always kept a pie hid out. "Where that big bulldozin' pie-thief Lorn Talford can't get to it."

"Greasy Ben," chuckled the Old Man, "is a-sniffin' and a-eyein' your flank pockets fer a bottle. Whatever you do, don't never give this grub-spoiler a drink. One sniff of a likker cork and he'll jerk off that dirty floursack apron an' pull out fer town. When he goes on a town jag he goes the route. Sobers up in jail. There's nothin' that ol' fool won't take a drink of, to commence a jag."

"I'd never fetch a bottle to a cow camp," said Bill Bryan with a faint grin.

Greasy Ben had a game leg. He'd turned over his chuck wagon years ago and the broken leg had been badly set and left him crippled. He was bald-headed and from under grizzled brows twinkled a pair of eyes as blue as the Montana sky. In anger those squinted eyes crackled and sparked like blue flame. In danger they were wintry and cold blue.

He packed a six-shooter in his mess box and he knew how to use it. He and Matt Oliver had come up the cattle trail together, and time had been when Ben was a top cowhand. But cooking beat punching cows for wages. What he wanted with more than jug money nobody knew. The money was gone the first night he'd hit a town. He was a boozer. But as long as there was a Mashed O outfit and an Old Man Matt Oliver on earth, Greasy Ben had a home at the ranch.

Matt Oliver would burn a church for Greasy Ben, and that went double for the gimpy roundup cook. They argued and jangled and had never been heard to agree on anything—except their opinion of Miz Oliver and their daughter Tracy. Tracy was the Old Man's one and only child. He'd wanted a son. But it had been a girl baby and the doctor said she'd never have another child.

Maybe that was why Tracy, named before birth in honor of Greasy Ben Tracy, did the best she knew how to make a hand with the Mashed O outfit. And now, at the age of eighteen, Tracy Oliver was a top cowhand, and as good a hand with a green bronc as ever you'd want to see. And as far as Old Man Matt Oliver and Greasy Ben Tracy were concerned, Miz Oliver and Tracy were their sun and moon and stars and no argument about that.

BILL BRYAN didn't know anything about that. Somewhere along the long trail he had followed up from the Mexican border, he had heard that the Mashed O in Montana was a good spread to work for. Old Man Matt Oliver didn't ask a stranger for a pedigree. And it wasn't much longer than a day-and-night horseback ride from the Mashed O home ranch to the Canadian line.

He hadn't exactly taken a new name when he gave the name Bill Bryan. Bryan was his first name. It had been his mother's maiden name. All he had done was shorten his last name Williams to Bill and switch

it around front into the leading position.

He was squatted on his hunkers with his plate full of grub and a big tin cup brimming with strong black coffee, when he heard Old Man Matt Oliver give him the name he'd go by while he worked for the Mashed O.

"I got more doggoned Bills a-workin' fer me now than I kin keep track of. Big Bill, Little Bill, Black Bill, the barn man at the ranch, White Bill. Holler 'Bill!' and there's a general stompede of Bills come a-runnin'. I'm callin' you Bryan."

Not that it made too much difference. The odds were he wouldn't get to stay too long with any one outfit, anyhow. A man on the dodge has to keep on moving along. Has to drift. Back-track at first and leave a real plain trail down into Mexico to Sonora and Chihuahua. Come back of a night when the moon is dark across the Rio Grande and throw in with some big trail herd outfit to Abilene. Stay plumb out and away from the old home range in New Mexico. Let the indictment against Bryan Williams gather dust in the files. If enough years slide by, and if you lose yourself on a faraway range, that indictment will someday be forgotten. But you'll never go back because you can't go back. Blot out your back trail. Play it close to your belly. Stay out of trouble. At the first hint of an argument, walk away from it. Make lots of acquaintances that bear you no ill will. Whatever you do, don't make a single enemy—or a close friend. An enemy will remember you with hate. A friend is even more dangerous because he'll talk about you and spread it that you're a good feller.

So you lone-wolf it. You mind your own business and let everybody and everything alone. Quiet. You ride it out, because the arm of the Law is far-reaching.

You'll get collared by that steel grip, hauled back to the old home cowtown of Alamogordo, New Mexico. They'll stand you up there on your two legs like you stood there that morning. The silence hung over that little adobe courtroom like a death pall, and there was the buzzing of that big blue bottle-fly around the white-maned Judge—the same judge who had been a lifelong friend of your cowman father.

"To be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy on you, Bryan Williams."

The night had been blacker than black and the wind had whipped the rain against the barred windows of the little jail. Then the big key had grated in the lock. It was so pitch dark inside the jail that Bryan never knew if they wore masks or not.

They had dragged him out and put him astraddle a horse and he'd fought them with everything he had in the way of guts and strength but there had been too many of them. It had never entered his head that this wasn't a lynching party until somebody slapped his horse across the rump. From there on it was a getaway in the night, and he still didn't know who those men were or if he'd somehow escaped lynching by some fluke. Thinking back he was pretty sure in his own mind now that they were his cowhand friends who had set him free.

But he had kept on drifting across the border where he spoke the language and savvied the people. And when Mexicans like you they'll hide you out and feed you and pass you along in the night. So Alamogordo, New Mexico, was long and far behind—yet too near the Law . . .

"YONDER COMES Lorn Talford and his cowhands," said Greasy Ben's cranky voice. "Swaller that pie, Bryan, before that big towheaded green-eyed Lorn thing sights it. The one big dream I always hope fer to lighten the burden of them drunken horrors I git in jail, is to set back eatin' all the fancy grub I kin while big Lorn Talford slowly dies of hunger. Why Matt Oliver ever hired

such a big spur-jinglin' bulldozer I never could figger. That's the thing that he's shapin' up to ramrod his Mashed O outfit."

Old Man Matt Oliver's puckered eyes watched his top-hand come riding up in the lead of about a dozen cowboys. "Lorn Talford is the best all-around ramrod in Montana, bar none."

Greasy Ben snorted and rattled his kettle lids with a long pothook, gimping around his big sheetiron roundup stove. It was a warm day and he had the sides of the mess tent rolled up and the back end tied back. He hobbled back and forth beneath the canvas fly that connected the tent with the rear end of the mess wagon. This was his small domain and here at his mess wagon Greasy Ben was absolute king, and the mess tent was his castle and his cranky voice was law. Let any fool dispute it and there was an old long-barreled wooden-handled six-shooter in the mess box to back his word.

Greasy Ben's battered hat slid back on his bald head and his black eyes were flinty. "Lorn Talford is a damned cattle thief."

Bryan had moved over to where his saddled horse stood, bridle reins dropped to ground-tie the sweat-marked gelding, and he made his movements seem casual as he slid the latigo through the cinch-ring. He stood behind the left side of his horse with his saddle gun within quick reach. His eyes studied, scrutinized Lorn Talford and every cowpuncher riding up with the big ramrod. As far as he could tell when they came up within closer view, every man in the outfit was a stranger to him.

Bryan unbuckled his flank cinch and freed the front cinch. He unsaddled and turned loose his horse, standing unprotected and afoot when Lorn Talford and his cowhands pulled up at the empty rope corral. Perhaps Greasy Ben was the only one who understood that the Old Man's saddled horse was near the wagon. If it came to a tight and this stranger had to make a fast getaway all he had to do was duck in behind the mess wagon and fork that Mashed O horse. That would leave the outfit afoot, and Bryan could make a gun-bid for his life.

That was back in Bryan's mind, and that was how he had it figured for a getaway if something came up. Lorn Talford and the other Mashed O cowhands had unsaddled and turned their horses loose before any of them took notice of the fact there was a stranger in camp. It was then that big towheaded green-eyed Lorn Talford sighted Bryan standing there alongside the mess wagon.

LORN TALFORD'S right hand dropped to the black butt of his holstered six-shooter. For a man who was top-hand and strawboss and sometimes ramrod and wagon boss of a big cow outfit like the Mashed O, Lorn Talford was almighty spooky and leery about strangers riding into camp. Perhaps he'd left snake tracks on his back trail; Bryan read that in the big cowhand's movement, and he grinned faintly.

Two of us, he told himself, in the same fix.

If that were true, a common fear and dread should have made for a bond between them. But Bryan hated the big towheaded cowpuncher on first sight. The look in Lorn Talford's glass-green eyes when he came swaggering up, told Bryan that the hatred and distrust was mutual.

"Who in hell are you?"

It was a flat-toned voice, matching the hard green glint of the bloodshot eyes under sun-bleached brows. He had a big jutting nose and a hard thin-lipped cruel mouth that was a slit in the week's stubble of dirty yellow whiskers.

The way he said it was an open-handed slap. He towered head and burly shoulders above Bryan.

Bryan cut a quick look past the big ramrod. Of the dozen cowpunchers who had ridden to camp with Lorn Talford, about four or five seemed to be enjoying this big tough swaggering play. The others were taut-looking, tracked where they stood. Unsmiling, grim-eyed, as if they hoped this big towheaded bulldozer had finally jumped a man who would make a fight of it. Bryan saw that, and then his eyes came back to meet that green stare and he had to tilt his head a little because he was that much shorter.

If he backed down, he'd better keep on moving, because the outfit would have him branded coward. But any kind of a gun ruckus now was the last thing on earth Bryan wanted.

He couldn't afford to shoot this big bulldozer, even if he was fast enough. Fist-whipping the big tough son was out of the question. Lorn Talford was the biggest man Bryan had ever been up against.

Anything but a gun-play, he told himself. And there was a mirthless flat-lipped grin on his face when he unbuckled his cartridge belt and tossed it with its holstered six-shooter on the ground.

"You're about the biggest son I ever laid eyes on. Who was the prize fighter said, 'The bigger they are the harder they fall'?" grinned Bryan.

Lorn Talford made a lunging grab for the front of Bryan's shirt, and missed.

Bryan ducked and sidestepped. He drove a right into the big man's guts and put everything he had into it. Lorn Talford grunted as if he'd been kicked in the belly by a bronc, but he kept on coming.

CHAPTER TWO

That Sleeper-Marked Steer!

BRYAN NEVER had a fighting chance against big Lorn Talford. The best he could hope for was to get in as many punishing licks as he could before the big towheaded bulldozer beat and tromped him senseless.

He ducked and dodged and sidestepped and got away from a few haymakers. Each time he slipped in under a flailing swing he would hook one in low where it would hurt. He wasn't fouling. But where the big ramrod's belly bulged over the low waistband of his Levis, the meat there made a natural target. Bryan worked on it like a punching bag.

Each time he landed a hard jolt the big ramrod would grunt and the wind would belch out his mouth. But it didn't stop that towheaded son. Then he drove a fist into Bryan's face and the jolting crash of it seemed to drive it through the back of his skull. Broken nose-bone crunched with a sickening sound. Blood spurted. Bryan staggered like a drunken man and his eyes went blind in a red-black pinwheel of spinning light. Pain stabbed and hammered and numbed.

That was the last he actually remembered. He was out on his feet. But he kept his arms jabbing and hooking and swinging. If he saw the big man at all, he saw him through a red blur. And then Lorn Talford knocked him off his feet and he went down and out like a light.

Lorn Talford stood over his motionless senseless bulk. "Git up, and take the rest of it!"

He kicked Bryan in the belly. The Old Man's voice growled like a grizzly.

"That'll do, Lorn."

Lorn Talford was blowing. Sweat beaded and trickled down his face. His slitted hard green eyes were glassy, bloodshot. There was a grayish color to his weathered skin. He was standing over the beaten man and he tripped as he lifted one spurred boot. His gait was unsteady when he walked over to the bed wagon. He sat down on the wagon-tongue with his hands on his knees. His huge shoulders sagged, and his sweat-matted head lowered.

Greasy Ben shoved his six-shooter back into the mess box and he gave the Old Man a scowl.

The gimpy roundup cook's voice was low-pitched. "I hope you didn't hold back too long before you called off your dog."

Greasy Ben took a clean towel and basin and bucket of water, and he squatted there on his hunkers and went to work.

The jingle of horse bells and clatter of shod hoofs announced the coming in of the big remuda, and the horse wrangler hazed his cavvy into the rope corral.

The cowhands washed up at the creek and got their tin plates and cups. The business of eating the noonday roundup dinner began. A mile or two from camp the rest of the Mashed O cowboys were holding the cattle that the roundup crew had fetched it. The bawling of cows and calves sounded.

They squatted with their heaped plates and swapped talk, but the augering was strained and awkward. They were watching the cook bring back the stranger. They kept cutting uneasy glances towards Lorn Talford. He stood hunched, letting the slobber thread down from a gaping slack mouth, sweating cold sweat and his eyes glazed and bloodshot.

"You shore worked on his big guts, Bryan." Greasy Ben's cranky voice had a carrying quality. "If you hadn't bin an edge slow duckin' that haymaker, you'd a bin the first man ever to lick that big bulldozer. As it is, Mr. Lorn Talford is sick as a poisoned dog."

The big sick ramrod must have overheard him but gave no sign. He was sick. His belly and guts felt as if they had been beaten into a pulp with a sledge hammer. There was the sour bitter taste of gall in his mouth—as if he'd been torn apart inside. That bald gimpy roundup cook wasn't lying. He was sick as a hound poisoned by a strychnine wolf bait. He'd come damned close to getting himself fist-whipped.

His hatred for the man who had pounded his guts stirred the gall bitter in his mouth and he spat. When he figured he could walk without doubling up and falling, he got up from where he sat on the tongue of the bed wagon and went down to the creek bank to slosh the sick cold sweat off and wash the dirty taste out of his mouth. When the sign came right he'd gut-shoot that stranger—whoever he was—and if he was a damned sneaking range detective, so much the better. No man on earth could ever whip big Lorn Talford—at any game.

BRYAN'S GRIN had a lopsided twist. His nose was broken and his battered eyes had swollen to discolored slits. He'd taken his licking. When he saw Lorn Talford head for the creek and hunker down there for all the world like a big sick animal, he knew that he'd gotten in his few licks. He didn't know what came next, but he hoped he could stay on with the Mashed O outfit.

Even with that hatred between them, Bryan wanted to stay. The pain didn't bother him half as much as the way the rest of the outfit was taking it. If they accepted him he was lucky.

He got to his feet and walked over to his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter on the ground. He buckled on his gun slowly and stood there.

The other cowpunchers had finished eating and were dumping empty tin plates and cups in the big dishpan. Some of them were going into the rope corral with their ketch-ropes coiled in their hands.

"You'll ride the extra string." The Old Man's voice sounded quiet enough and matter-of-fact. There was a glint in his puckered eyes that told Bryan he was still working for the Mashed O. "The horse wrangler will show you your string, Bryan."

That was all there was to it. Bryan roped a big blue roan the horse wrangler

said was one of his string. The blue roan hadn't had a saddle on his back for weeks and pitched a few jumps. He wasn't hard to ride. Bryan headed for the holdup and a couple of cowboys overtook him and rode along for a little ways in silence.

"You'll have to watch out for that big son from now on," said one of them. "Lorn Talford is bad medicine."

Bryan said he hated to have trouble of any kind, but that Old Man Matt Oliver had hired him and he aimed to keep on working for the Mashed O till the Old Man fired him.

He knew why the Old Man hadn't tried to prevent the fight, and why nobody had moved in to stop it. He knew it even before the other cowboy said that Lorn Talford always whipped every cowhand the Old Man hired just to show who was boss. From there on Lorn rode the new man like a horse—heavy, with a spade bit.

Even the cowhands sent to represent other outfits got whipped when they showed up at the Mashed O wagon. These two cowboys were a couple of reps who were working on through with the calf roundup.

"Mighty few reps want to work with the Mashed O wagon when Lorn is ramroddin' it—for more reasons than one. You'll learn why if you stay on with the outfit—unless you got a blind side."

"But you won't see nothin', mister, while the Old Man's with the roundup."

The Old Man had already ridden out to where they were holding the cattle gathered on that morning's big circle. The cowhands they were relieving were quitting the herd and heading for camp to eat dinner and change horses. News of the fight must have gone out to the herd with the cowboys who had seen it. Those Mashed O cowpunchers headed for camp, swung over to get a look at the new man who had gut-punched Lorn Talford till that big son was still too bellyached to ride back to his cattle. Mostly they gave Bryan a grin and a nod as they rode past.

The one who looked too young to be a regular hand pulled up. He was slim, tanned, with a short nose and stubborn chin and a pair of smoke gray eyes set under black brows. And suddenly Bryan knew that it was a girl.

"I'm Tracy Oliver." She motioned the two reps on towards the herd. There was anger now in her smoke-gray eyes.

"That was a darned fool boneheaded way to start out. What's the name you gave the Old Man?" Her voice was sharp-edged with suppressed anger.

"Bryan."

"All right, Bryan. Locking horns with Lorn right off! Looks like a man in your boots would have better sense. Whatever got into you?"

BRYAN DIDN'T know what the girl was talking about. His smashed nose was throbbing with pain under its crude bandage. He had to breathe through his mouth because his bandaged nostrils were clogged with drying blood. He was in no good humor, and this daughter of Matt Oliver's was acting mighty smart-aleck and bossy.

"Listen, lady. I hired out to Matt Oliver to punch cows for forty a month. Mebbyso while Lorn Talford is runnin' the wagon, I'll be takin' his orders. Or I kin saddle my private an' pack my bed horse and drift yonderly. That gives me one too many bosses as it is.

"So you're Tracy Oliver, huh? I never heard of Tracy Oliver. If you got to bawl somebody out, tackle Lorn Talford.

"Now I'll get out yonder to work out my forty a month."

Bryan rode around and past the girl, on towards the holdup without a backward glance.

Tracy Oliver stared after him, the anger going out of her eyes. Her black brows knit in a thoughful frown. Then she shrugged her slim shoulders.

"All right, Mr. Range Detective. If that's how you want to play it." And Tracy Oliver rode on to camp at a slow trot.

Bryan was plenty disgusted with himself by the time he reached the herd and he reined up there where the cattle were bunched. He did his job of holding up the cattle while the Old Man and one of his Mashed O cowboys rode into the herd to commence cutting out cows and calves. Bryan had plenty time to cuss himself out for the prize bonehead of the cow country.

Now why did he have to bow up and get himself into that fool argument with Tracy Oliver? It's things like that that get a man disliked. When he pulls out and quits that part of the country and some nosy lawman gets to asking questions, he gets the answers he wants because somebody like that girl remembers.

For a man on the dodge, he told himself, you're doing right well by yourself, Bryan. A few more run-ins like you had with Lorn Talford and another argument with the Old Man's daughter and you'd just as well get out that reward dodger on you and tack it to the chuck wagon along with a map. Then when the law man comes a-slippin' along a-sniffin' out your getaway trail, there it is.

"That's the feller called hisself Bryan," the Old Man will tell the law gent, "and there's the trail he taken when he run hisself off with his yap-yappin'. I hope you hamstring the smart aleck son because he sassed my daughter Tracy. You won't have no trouble a-follerin' his trail because he goes outa his way to make hisself remembered."

For a man on the dodge, Bryan, you are the one and only and original Wise Kid. You are mebbe the Too Wise Kid.

Bryan saw Tracy Oliver when she came riding back to the herd on a fresh horse. Lorn Talford was riding along with her and he must have gotten cured of his gutache because there was a grin on his beefy face. The daughter of Old Man Matt Oliver was laughing at something the big towheaded ramrod was telling her.

The Old Man and the cowhand who had been teamed with him rode out of the herd to rest their horses. Tracy Oliver and Lorn rode into the herd.

They were both riding top cowhorses and they had worked together a lot, Bryan judged, from the easy sure way they went at it. There wasn't a lost motion of either horse and rider. It was good to watch. Bryan put aside his hatred for the big tough ramrod long enough to admit that Lorn Talford had savvy.

Lorn Talford was using a spade bit but he used it right—with a light hand and easy. For a big man he sat a horse well. But if ever a horse turned mean on him, that big tough towheaded cowpuncher would tear that horse's mouth apart with that cruel spade bit and he'd clamp his two hundred and fifty pound bulk down in his saddle till the beaten horse dropped dead under him.

Big Lorn was showing off now, cutting cattle with the Old Man's daughter, with his hat jack-deuce and cuttin' 'em out like do-si-do—to the jingle of his silver-mounted spurs.

Bryan was helping hold up and he was between the holdup and the cut. Everytime Lorn and Tracy eased a cow and calf to the edge of the herd and clear, it was Bryan's job to pick up the cow and calf and head 'em for the cut.

Every time Lorn and Tracy shoved a cow and calf out of the herd the big towheaded ramrod would give Bryan a nasty grin. But the daughter of Old Man Matt Oliver never once gave Bryan so much as a look.

A NEW kind of hatred was slowly poisoning Bryan. He'd hated that big bulldozer on sight, and the beating he'd taken had tended to increase that hatred. But this new feeling of hate he felt seeping

into his blood was something else. It had to do with that high-chinned daughter of the Old Man's. It had to do with her teaming up with that big spurjingler who rode with a saddle swagger. And if Bryan had been stuck on the gal he'd have admitted it was green-eyed jealousy. . . .

But hell, he told himself, I never laid eyes on her till now.

Bryan's nose was hurting him and his blackened eyes felt as if somebody had poured hot sand into them and the pain had him feeling half sick. So he wasn't paying too much attention when Lorn and Tracy cut a cow and a big calf out of the herd. He was slow picking 'em up, and hadn't untracked his horse when Tracy Oliver's voice cut him like a whiplash.

"Do your sleepin' on dayherd, cowboy. Or was you lookin' the other way a-purpose?"

Bryan had some nasty remark ready to cut back at her, when he saw the look on Lorn Talford's face. It was a sullen, ugly look.

Lorn Talford was paying Bryan no attention this time. He was cutting quick furtive looks at the girl and the girl's tanned cheeks were flushed and her eyes black with anger. Tracy was looking at the cow and calf and then at Bryan as he rode close to her to pick them up. Bryan forgot his own anger and humiliation and he turned cowman right now.

Bryan was a stranger in Montana. But he had a fair knowledge of the brands and earmarks of this section of Montana, and he'd been reading those brands and earmarks on the cattle held in the holdup.

It was a U Bar cow. The calf belonged to her. The calf was still unbranded. But somebody had earmarked the calf, the left ear split and the right ear swallow-forked. Those earmarks belonged to the Mashed O brand. The U Bar outfit was earmarked with an underbit on the left ear and underslope on the right ear.

The story was told there for any cowman to read. Somebody had sleeper-marked the calf, taking the chance that it would be missed on the spring roundup. By fall when it was old enough to wean, the big calf could be cut away from its mammy and run off and branded in the Mashed O iron to match the earmarks. Sleeper marking was one of the many tricks of cattle rustling. The daughter of Old Man Matt Oliver had found it out and was kicking it out into the open for the whole wide world to look at.

Tracy Oliver and Lorn Talford had had some kind of quick argument when she picked up the cow and calf in the middle of the herd. She was still flushed with anger. Lorn was sullen and ugly.

"Where's that Nester Pool rep?" Tracy shot the question at the Flying W rep who had been helping Bryan shove 'em out to the cut.

"Bowed up an' quit, ma'am. Claimed Lorn kep' him on dayherd instead of takin' him along on circle an' lettin' him cut his Nester Pool stuff outa the gatherment. He taken his bed but didn't cut his string. His Pool ponies is still in the remuda. He told us other reps to look after the Nester Pool int'rests till them little ranchers could send out another. Said he wasn't gittin' enough wages to take what he taken from Lorn Talford."

Tracy muttered something that sounded like cuss words. She told the Flying W rep to remember that U Bar cow and calf. "We've got the Mashed O stuff out. You reps can start your cuttin' an' slashin'."

The Old Man had already gone back to camp to change horses, and now Lorn Talford was heading for the wagon at a long trot. The Old Man and Lorn would be doing most of the calf roping when they started branding. They'd need fresh horses.

The U Bar was one of the dozen or so brands belonging to small ranchers who made up the Nester Pool. Bryan

knew that. He had both ears cocked and his eyes open and his mouth shut. There was something crooked going on, but it was none of his business. His horse was a little sweaty and leg-weary and he rode around to the far side of the herd. The work was easier there and all he had to do was to help keep the ragged edges of the holdup thrown back. He lazed in the saddle and was rolling a smoke when Tracy Oliver rode up.

The black anger was gone from her smoky gray eyes now and she was looking at him oddly, as if something about him was puzzling her. Then she grinned like a small boy who's made a blunder.

"Forget what I said, Bryan. You see, I read your brand wrong. I mistook you for somebody else. If you can forget it—"

Bryan grinned faintly, "Who was it you figured you was cussin' out?"

"A man with a range detective badge pinned to his undershirt."

CHAPTER THREE

Murderers' Roundez-Vous

BRYAN TOLD himself that evening when he went into the corral that now was the time to bunch it. Ketch his private horse and pack up and drift. Working for the Mashed O right now was just like sitting on a powder keg with the fuse lit.

There's a man showin' up with a law badge pinned to his undershirt, Bryan. He's paid to ketch cattle rustlers. But his eagle eye has mebbyso sighted a reward dodger tacked up somewheres with your name and pedigree and the size of the bounty marked down. It's time you drifted yonderly, Bryan.

But he dropped his loop on the gelding the big tough ramrod Lorn Talford told him was his night-horse.

The Mashed O was holding a dayherd. They were gathering steers down in the badlands and throwing them back on the summer range, along with strays in the rep irons. It wasn't much of a herd. But a small herd is harder to hold of a night than a big 'un, and every man in the outfit was standing a two-hour night guard with two men on each guard.

The new Nester Pool rep had showed up. He'd ridden up at supper time and Lorn Talford had welcomed him with a flat grin. "H're yuh, Hooker! Hope you last longer than that sorry thing you sent out."

"Me 'n you got along before, Lorn."

Jay Hooker owned his own iron and his ranch was down on the Missouri River. He was one of the Nester Pool. He always put up more hay than he could feed so he wintered some of it with the Mashed O. And the Hooker place was listed as one of the Mashed O line camps.

Jay Hooker was on the younger side of thirty—tall and slim with sandy red hair, a lean long jaw, and a hawkbeaked nose. His eyes were pale gray and they slid away from any hard scrutiny. The look that passed between Lorn Talford and Jay Hooker was quick and it had a hidden meaning.

Bryan saw it, and he knew that Jay Hooker was afraid of Lorn Talford. But it was a fear that was mixed with hatred.

Lorn put Hooker on third guard with Bryan. There was an ugly threat in the big ramrod's green eyes.

"The two of you kin cuss me out—it'll make the time pass quicker. But remember that the sagebrush has ears."

The Old Man had eaten supper and then pulled out for the home ranch, taking Tracy along with him. Tracy Oliver hadn't added a word to what she had told Bryan.

She had showed up later when they were branding. Bryan had watched her heel calf after calf without a miss. And then she had ridden to camp with her Old Man, and at supper she'd been

friendly with Lorn. Too friendly to suit Bryan. The pair of them ate supper off to themselves and acted as if they had a lot of secrets together that called for smiles and lingering looks.

While Bryan covertly watched them from under the low-pulled slanted brim of his hat, he saw Lorn reach out and take hold of her hand where they sat with their supper plates. Lorn was asking her something and she was hesitating and cutting looks towards the Old Man who was arguing with Greasy Ben.

Then Tracy had made up her mind. She'd nodded her head and given Lorn an uncertain smile. And he'd grinned as if he'd won an argument of some kind. Then she'd pulled her hand away and gone on eating supper.

BEFORE SHE and her Old Man pulled out, Tracy and Greasy Ben had gone down to the creek where the gimpy roundup cook had located a magpie cache. It was half an hour or more before they came back. They were both trying too hard, Bryan thought, to act like that's what they had been talking about. After Tracy had ridden away with her Old Man and the outfit were roping their night horses from the corraled remuda, Greasy Ben got Bryan aside.

"Don't quit this outfit, Bryan. Hang an' rattle. It'll pay you fightin' wages."

"I ain't that hard-up for the money, Greasy Ben."

"Then lemme put it another way. How far would you go fer Tracy Oliver if she actually needed a friend?"

"I reckon I'd go the limit." Bryan had committed himself before he had time to think it out.

The cranky gimpy little old bald headed roundup cook grinned. "I told her you'd do to take along. Now don't make me out a damn' liar. Lemme put a beefsteak poultice on them eyes Lorn give you. You'll need keen eyesight."

So Bryan hadn't saddled his private horse and quit the Mashed O. He was wide awake when a man rode into camp from the night herd to call the relief guard. Before the cowboy was off his horse Bryan was sitting up and pulling on his boots. He got his night horse off the picket rope and was headed for the herd when he saw two cowhands ride out from camp and on out to the herd ahead of him.

Then it occurred to him it was second guard, not third guard, going on. Instead of riding back to camp he rode on alone. It was moonlight and the stars shone and the night air was soft and warm. He had a lot of things to figure out. He rode along without paying any attention to where his Mashed O night-horse was taking him. He was deep in a lot of troubled thought when he heard voices, and he pulled up short. He was in the dark shadow of a long brushy coulee.

The choked vibrant voice of Tracy Oliver sounded in the dark: "You lay a hand on me, Lorn, and I'll quirt your eyes out!"

Lorn's laugh had an ugly sound. "Fine way to talk to the man you're goin' to marry."

"Marry you, Lorn? Don't be comical. I told you I'd meet you tonight. And I did. But don't get any fancy notions. You're a cattle thief, Lorn. That sleeper-marked U Bar calf isn't the first evidence I've picked up. You've been rustling cattle for a long time—using your ramrod job at the Mashed O to cover your tracks.

"When some nester gets to watching you, you work him over and he keeps his mouth shut because he's scared you'll kill him. You've got Jay Hooker buffaloed. I don't want to send any man to the pen, and there are some things in your nature that I half-way like. So before I met you tonight I decided to give you your chance. And you'd better take it, Lorn."

"Meanin'?" Lorn's voice was ugly.

"Quit the Mashed O. And don't ever come back."

"That's a fine purty speech to come from the daughter of a cattle thief. Hell, yes, I bin rustlin' cattle. Old Man Matt Oliver is payin' me them kind of ramrod wages. When the Law sends Lorn Talford to the pen, Lorn will be takin' Old Man Matt Oliver right along with him. Don't take my word for it. Ask your Old Man." Lorn Talford was grinning in the dark.

"You're lying!"

"You got a fancy school education, or if you ain't read up on the Law, ask some smart lawyer. I don't own a brand or earmark. Any cattle-thievin' Lorn Talford's done, them stolen cattle went into the Mashed O iron. There she lays. Pick it up from there. You're supposed to be a smart cowhand. Any forty-a-month cowpuncher kin give you the same answer. Lorn Talford is just a hired man, takin' his orders from Old Man Matt Oliver.

"That's a shore purty lovers' full moon a-shinin' on the Mashed O range tonight. But I ain't a man to crowd my luck. You think 'er over on your ride back to the home ranch. I'll be around when the sign is right to git the answer. You got your choice. You kin be the daughter of a convict, or the wife of the Mashed O ramrod. For a smart gal like Tracy Oliver it shouldn't be too big a riddle. So long, Tracy."

BIG LORN TALFORD passed within six-shooter range of where Bryan sat his horse behind the brush. The Mashed O ramrod was whistling tunelessly through his teeth as he went by. Bryan let him ride out of sight.

He didn't know he had his six-shooter gripped in his hand until he felt its weight in his gun hand.

He shoved it into its holster, hit a lope. He was headed up the long coulee. He wanted to overtake Tracy Oliver. He wanted to tell her. He didn't know exactly what he'd say or how he'd say it, but that would take care of itself.

But Tracy Oliver was gone. After an hour of prowling Bryan headed back for camp. He dismounted and put his horse back on the picket rope. He was moving as cautiously as he could back to his tarp-covered bed when he froze in his tracks. It was Lorn Talford's voice.

"You'll string your bets with mine, Hooker, or I'll leave your dead carcass dry-gulched. Understand?"

"Ain't I always played 'er thataway, Lorn?" There was a dismal scared whine in the whispered voice of the Nester Pool rep.

"Since the moonlit night I rode up on you butcherin' a Mashed O beef, Hooker, you ain't had no other choice. But a man hears things he ain't supposed to hear—like your drunken slobber in town; like you makin' a slick deal with the Livestock Association to git yourself a tin badge. *This!*"

They were close down there where the high willows and buckbrush grew thick along the creek bank. Bryan could hear the muffled thud of a big fist. A man gasped as the wind went out of him.

"Purty thing," chuckled Lorn Talford. "All nickel-plated. You sneakin', double-crossin', lyin' son! You sold the Association the deal that it takes a cattle thief to git goods on a cattle thief. You value that mangy hide of yourn, Hooker. Now beg fer it!"

"Don't kill me, Lorn. Lemme go. I'll play it your way, any way you deal 'em."

"Wipe your nose, Hooker. Shut up your damn' whinin'. I'll give you one chance."

"Name it, Lorn. I'm your huckleberry."

"Ever kill a man, Hooker?"

"Gawd, no!"

"You're goin' to."

"Not that, Lorn. If it's Old Man Matt Oliver, or Greasy Ben, I ain't got the guts. I can't!"

"Shut up. Old Man Matt Oliver is goin' to be my daddy-in-law when I marry Tracy an' git the Mashed O fer a weddin' present. Greasy Ben will live to be a hunderd, hatin' my guts till he's poisoned hisself with it. You're a damned fool, Hooker."

"Then who—?"

"This feller the Old Man just hired. Calls hisself Bryan. If the Old Man hadn't bin there I'd a got the job done myself."

"What's he done he needs killin' off, Lorn?"

"Nothin'. Yet. It's what he aims to do. He's got to be stopped, right now. I don't know who he is nor where he come from. But he's dangerous. It's in his eye. Greasy Ben cottoned to him right off. The Old Man hired this Bryan when he knows my outfit is full-handed. This Bryan shows up from nowheres, and he hires out to the Mashed O.

"When you git him killed, frisk him good. If there's a law badge in his pocket or down in his boot or pinned next to his hide, glaum onto it. That's your job, Hooker. Build to it when you're on guard with him tonight. We'll fix up your story when you git the job done. That's all, Hooker. Here's your law badge to hide behind when you kill Bryan."

Lorn's spurs jingled as he moved off towards the mess wagon to get a cup of coffee.

Jay Hooker's lanky six foot frame was sagging as he headed back for his tarp-covered bed on the ground beyond the bed wagon. He seemed burdened with a load that was hard to pack, and he kept to the shadows, furtive, like a sick coyote.

Bryan had spread his tarp-covered bed a short ways from the mess tent. He let Lorn and Hooker get back to bed before he slipped in between his blankets. He hardly had the bed warm before he was called to go on third guard. He told himself that he was into this thing too deep now to back out. He'd play it out.

CHAPTER FOUR

See You in the Hoosegow!

THE herd was lying good on the bedground. Bryan and Jay Hooker rode around the bedded herd in opposite directions. Bryan had a cigarette rolled and it hung unlit from a corner of his mouth. He was groping in his chaps pocket for a match when he met Hooker and pulled up.

"Got a match?" he asked the Nester Pool rep.

Hooker's lantern-jawed face looked as gray as a dirty blanket and his skin glistened with clammy sweat. His eyes slid away from Bryan's. Hooker had a killing job to do and was scared to tackle it. He grinned uncertainly and fumbled in his pocket for matches. He was holding the matches towards Bryan and their stirrups scraped. Then he saw the six-shooter in Bryan's hand.

"You hang onto those matches, Hooker. So's I'll know what you're holdin' in your gun hand."

"What the hell, mister?"

"I overheard that little medicine talk you had with Lorn Talford. You still in the notion of killin' me?"

Hooker's whine sounded like the truth. "I haven't got the guts to kill nobody. I'm ketched between a chill and a sweat an' that's no lie. Lorn's got the Injun sign on me. That big son won't stop at nothin'. If I don't kill you, he'll kill me. And if I don't git my range detective job done the Association will send me to the pen for cattle rustlin'. That's the deal they handed me. Anything more in the way of misery you kin pour down on Jay Hooker is water off a hell-diver's back."

There was something almost comical about the lanky man's misery. His big-boned frame sagged and his lantern jaw slacked and his shifty pale eyes looked watery.

"Sounds like you ain't proud of that law badge, Hooker."

"It was wished on me. It's made in the shape of a star—sharp-pointed. Lorn Talford is just the man to make me sprinkle salt on the damn' thing an' swaller it, with the whole outfit a-gawkin' an' givin' me the horse laugh. And then he'll wait till the sign is right and he'll dry-gulch me. Did you ever wish you'd bin born dead, mister?"

"We kin ride off a ways," Bryan shoved his gun back into its holster. "The noise won't spook the cattle there. I'll give you an even break for your gun. Mebbeso you'll be lucky."

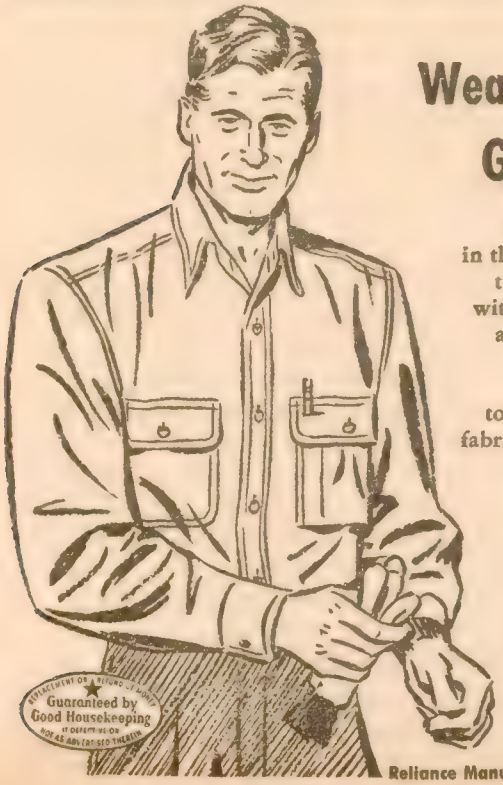
Jay Hooker cringed in his saddle, lifting both hands and spilling the matches. Sweat gleamed on his face.

"I throwed away my gun, mister. I'm headed fer town. I'm givin' this damn' tin star back to the Association. And I'm goin' to the Deer Lodge pen, like they said they'd send me up for cattle rustlin'. I'll winter there in a nice warm cell, makin' horsehair bridles. No buckin' snowdrifts. No handlin' stolen cattle fer Lorn Talford an' gittin' nothin' fer pay but abuse. Here I never give you nothin'. You take this damn' tin star, mister. Jay Hooker is headed fer jail, where it's safe."

Bryan took the law badge. He wanted to chuckle. He felt sorry for the poor scared rancher.

"Before you pull out, Hooker, tell me. How deep is Old Man Matt Oliver mixed up with Lorn Talford in this cattle rustlin'?"

Jay Hooker's voice lost its whine. "Old Man Matt Oliver is as square as a die. He'll lean over backwards to stay honest. Lorn is playin' it lone-handed. He's stealin' as many cattle from the Mashed O as he is from the little nesters. He's usin' me and my place on the river and my Three Links brand. All I git is the kind



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of damned abuse like you heard tonight."

"The Stockmen's Association know that?"

"No. I got picked up on suspicion. They scared the pants off me. But I wasn't damn fool enough to squeal on Lorn Talford. He'd kill me if he knowed I was spilling what I'm tellin' you now. I'm goin' to the pen because a stock inspector ketched me with a fresh butchered beef an' no hide with my brand on it to fit. I'll plead guilty an' go to the Deer Lodge pen. I'll make you a horsehair bridle if you whip Lorn Talford—the purtiest horsehair bridle you ever could want to give a schoolmarm. If you'll tromp the guts outa Lorn Talford."

"I'll hold you to that, Hooker. Now tell me how Lorn Talford works his cattle thievin'."

"SIMPLE as A.B.C. He sleepermarks some big unbranded calves. Late in the fall he gits me to go with him an' we pick 'em up, put 'em in my Three Links. There'll be more there than we work the brands on. Workin' the Mashed O into the Three Links is easy. And changin' the earmarks into my earmark that crops both ears is still easier.

"Every fall there's enough Three Links steers gathered on the Mashed O roundup an' shipped to Chicago with the Mashed O cattle to run a hell of a lot of money. I git a shady rep as a cattle thief, but it can't be proved because Lorn is ramroddin' the Mashed O and he covers up fer me. It's Lorn Talford that gits every dollar them Three Links beef steers fetch on the Chicago Union Stockyards market. And that's the truth.

"That's what the Association sent me out to git the proof on when they gimme that tin star. But I'm scared to squeal on Lorn. That big tough devil would go to the pen with me. And he'd kill me. So I'm keepin' my big trap shut. I'm goin' to the pen alone. Anything I told you now I'll take back on the witness stand. Lorn's got the idee you got a law badge in your pocket. All right. Now you got two of the damn things. It's your game. I've dealt Jay Hooker out."

Then Bryan told Hooker to head for the Mashed O home ranch instead of heading straight for town to give himself up there.

"Stop by the Mashed O ranch, Hooker. Tell Tracy Oliver that it was you that had the law badge pinned to your undershirt, but that you handed the law badge over to Bryan. It won't hurt you to do her that favor."

"I'll tell her, mister," said Jay Hooker, nodding his head.

"And tell her that Lorn Talford was lyin' when he said he could send her Old Man to the pen."

"You don't know Lorn Talford. He's worked it so that if he's ketched, he'll throw the blame on Old Man Matt Oliver. Lorn is ramroddin' the Mashed O. He'll swear he's bin takin' his cattle rustlin' orders from Old Man Matt Oliver. He's bragged that to me. I've heard Lorn tell me many a time that the Old Man is his ace in the hole. And that big tough dirty son will do what he threatens he'll do if ever he's ketched in any kind of cattle rustlin'.

"Lorn Talford has got Old Man Matt Oliver acrost the barrel, and the Old Man knows it. That's why he can't fire that big cattle thievin' ramrod that's runnin' his Mashed O. But if ever Lorn Talford tries it on, he's a dead 'un. Because Greasy Ben will be there in the courtroom when Lorn takes the witness stand. Greasy Ben will gut-shoot that big Lorn Talford then an' there in front of the Judge and jury that'll hang him for it. And that's that."

Bryan spoke quietly. "I'm grateful to you for spreadin' 'em face up, Hooker. Ain't ever'body'd do what you done. So long. I'll see you in jail."

CHAPTER FIVE

Man-Buster of the Mashed O

THE Law can hang a man only once. That was what Bryan told himself while he rode alone around the bedded herd, while he planned it out how he would tackle Lorn Talford. He was going to have to kill that big towheaded Mashed O ramrod.

Bryan had never killed anybody. The Law down yonder in New Mexico had made a sorry mistake. But the evidence had been laid on the line and Judge Lane at Alamogordo had had no choice. There was the dead stock inspector at Bryan Williams' cabin. There were the stolen horses in Bryan Williams' horse pasture—planted there when the horse thieves had killed the stock inspector and drifted yonderly with the bulk of their stolen horses. They'd left half a dozen head of those stolen horses there to clinch the case.

The sheriff had ridden up right after Bryan got back to his ranch from a night's running gun fight he'd matched and lost with the three horse thieves. On that evidence the Law had arrested and tried and convicted Bryan Williams of killing the stock inspector. The stock inspector whose name was Joe Cutter and Bryan Williams had hated each other's guts for a long time. Bryan had found out that Joe Cutter was one of the horse thief gang, and had been using his stock inspector's badge to hide behind while he protected the horse thieves. Because of some bitter argument concerning the split of money they were getting for stolen horses, they had killed Joe Cutter.

Sooner or later the truth would be dragged out. Bryan Williams had friends in New Mexico—the same cowhands who had broken into the Alamogordo jail to set him free. Those cowhands would sooner or later grab the three horse thieves who had killed stock Inspector Joe Cutter. The truth of that killing would be dragged out of their horse-thief hides.

But this was something else. This was right now. Bryan had plenty of time to think it over while he rode alone around the bedded herd. If he had a lick of sense, he would ride away. This wasn't his affair. He'd blundered into it. All he had to do was ride across the Canadian line, drift yonderly. In a few months or a year or two he'd somehow get word that his slate had been cleaned down yonder in New Mexico. And then he could go back home to his own little cow outfit.

Bryan held the herd on through third guard and through the two hours of last guard. He hadn't gone to camp to wake the two men who were booked for last guard. It was only when dawn was streaking the sky that Bryan quit the herd. And he rode back to where the Mashed O roundup was camped.

The remuda was corraled and the cowpunchers were catching their circle horses and saddling.

Bryan unsaddled his night horse and turned it loose. Lorn Talford was nowhere in sight. Bryan headed for the mess tent. Every man in the outfit seemed to be watching him, wondering why he hadn't called the two men to go on last guard, wondering what had become of Hooker.

The sidewalls of the mess tent were down, the back flaps shut. As Bryan neared the tent he heard Lorn Talford's voice.

"Somebody shoulda told you, Greasy. You're too damned old and stove-up fer that kinda work. Next time you reach for that old wore-out shootin' iron you got in the chuck box, I won't let you off this easy."

Bryan heard the roundup cook cussing in a creaky voice. Then he heard a dull thud, and the big tough ramrod's snarling chuckle.

"Git up, Greasy, and I'll knock you

down some more. Git up on your hind laigs."

Bryan's hand was on his six-shooter when he walked in under the canvas fly that connected the end of the chuck wagon with the mess tent.

Greasy Ben was down on his hands and knees, the blood dripping from his mouth. His bald head was lowered, shaking sluggishly.

Big towheaded Lorn Talford stood on widespread legs, a snarling grin on his whiskered face, his bloodshot eyes green as bottle-glass. There was a six-shooter in his big hand. He'd just used it to club the little old roundup cook across the face. There was murder in his green eyes when he saw Bryan.

HE HAD waited for Jay Hooker to ride into camp with the word that Bryan was dead. The waiting had kept the big ramrod awake, and his nerves rubbed raw, and his temper saw-edged. When Greasy Ben had crossed him, Lorn had gotten ugly. The old roundup cook had reached into the chuck box for his six-shooter, but Lorn had beat him to it and clubbed him with a gun barrel.

Lorn Talford knew his game was up. He read it in the blackened eyes of the stranger, saw it when he saw the law badge pinned there, its nickel-plated star glinting in the lantern light. Lorn Talford had no way of knowing it was Jay Hooker's badge.

The gun in Lorn Talford's hand was cocked. It spewed flame and its heavy .45 slug hit Bryan in the left shoulder and knocked him sideways and off-balance. He was lurching drunkenly when he pulled his gun and thumbed back the hammer.

Not ten feet of distance separated the two men. It was point-blank shooting. Bryan's gun hadn't lifted higher than his flank. He had taken no aim. He had just pointed the gun and pulled the trigger.

It was a gut-shot. The big towheaded ramrod doubled up when the heavy .45 slug thudded in. He was standing behind the rawhide-topped table. When his two-hundred and fifty pound hulk lurched over onto the table, the table legs gave way and the table upset, showering the tent with a huge tin dishpan filled with tin plates and cups and knives and forks and spoons.

Lorn grabbed at his wounded belly with his left hand, and he reeled and staggered and tried to get his legs braced. His jaw sagged open a little and grunting hawking sounds came from his open mouth. He knew he was gut-shot and the horror of it was in his eyes.

His skin had a livid color and glistened with sweat and he kept staring at Bryan with those glassy green eyes. He still gripped his gun but he kept swaying and lurching and he held onto his wound and he couldn't straighten up. It wasn't pain there in his eyes—it was shock. And the horror of being gutshot. And the fear of death. He'd always been so overgrown and big and tough that he got to believing he couldn't be hurt.

But yesterday his belly and guts had been pounded so much he'd been sick. Now this same short-complected cowpuncher with a law badge pinned to his shirt had shot a hole in his guts, and a man can't live long when he's shot through the guts with a .45.

"You've killed me, you runty son! You've killed Lorn Talford!"

All the toughness was gone now. It had ebbed out through his bullet-torn guts. His voice had lost its human sound—it was a wild, ragged, rasping, horrible noise like some mortally wounded, vicious animal would make.

Bryan heard it dinning in his ears. He was leaning back against the open table-end of the mess wagon, his legs braced, his six-shooter cocked in his hand. His left arm hung dangling and his whole left shoulder and arm clear down to his finger-

tips was numb. A dull thumping pain was commencing, and the blood was oozing out.

He'd be getting dizzy and weak. He'd better kill that big thing before he passed out. It would be like killing a wounded animal that stood a chance of getting well. It would be murder—unless Lorn Talford tried to shoot him. Then Bryan would shoot first.

"Use your gun!" Bryan's voice came from behind bared clenched teeth. It had a gritty sound.

"Fight!" Greasy Ben was getting up onto his feet. His voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "Quit bellyachin', Talford! Show your big toughness!"

Greasy Ben gimped crabwise to his chuck box, and he reached in and dragged out his old wooden-handled long-barreled six-shooter.

Bryan didn't see the old roundup cook. He had to watch Lorn Talford. He had to watch the gun in the big ramrod's hand. The red dizziness was filming Bryan's eyes, and he blinked and gritted his teeth and shook his head to clear away the red-blackness. He was going out like a light. Lorn Talford wouldn't lift that gun in his big hand. The horrible saw-edged screaming dinned into Bryan's ears.

"You killed me!" Lorn's rasping bellow filled the tent. Then Bryan's gun slid from his hand and his braced legs commenced hinging at the knees. Lorn Talford saw it. His gun barrel tilted up. His big thumb was pulling back the hammer.

THAT was when Greasy Ben Tracy shot Lorn Talford square between his slitted bloodshot eyes. "Not Bryan." The little old roundup cook's voice had a waspish sound. "It was Greasy Ben sent you to hell on a one-way ticket."

Lorn Talford's huge two hundred and fifty pound bulk went down with a heavy crash, and he lay there dead in the clutter of dirty tin plates and cups and wood.

Bryan was down near the end of the mess wagon, lying in a puddling smear of his own blood, and his world was going down in a red-black whirlpool of oblivion.

Greasy Ben, the roundup cook, hipshot to favor his gimpy leg, stood there, blood trickling from his nose and mouth where Lorn's gunbarrel had chopped his face. The light of battle still glinted in his puckered eyes. His old six-shooter—the gun he called his hawg-laig—tilted and the gunpowder smoke wisped from its muzzle.

The shooting inside the mess tent had stopped the Mashed O outfit in its boot tracks. Those cowhands packing six-shooters had their hands on their guns. Others whose six-shooters were in their bedrolls commenced easing away. They tensed when the roar of .45 guns exploded inside the mess tent. Lorn Talford's horrible howling wail of death made their tough hides crawl.

But not a man in the outfit—Mashed O cowboys or reps from other outfits—made a move to take any part in it.

Then they heard the cranky waspish voice of Greasy Ben cussing. Greasy Ben was cussing out the dead ramrod for the shambles he'd made of the spick-and-span neat mess tent.

"Hellamighty, lookit the wreck an' ruination you made of it! You couldn't even die, you big overgrowed bulldozer, without clutterin' up the mess tent! Just look at what you left behind fer somebody to clean up."

The sound of Greasy Ben's voice was a healthy noise and it brought the whole outfit there. For a long moment they stared at the dead ramrod lying there beside the overturned mess table in a littered tangle of dishes, his six-shooter still gripped in his big hand, a black blood oozing hole between his sightless eyes.

When the Old Man came in, Jay Hooker was with him. They rode up while Greasy Ben was finishing what he called a patch-up job on Bryan. Bryan lay on

his own bed in the bed tent, bandaged and suffering pain when he came alive.

OLD Man Matt Oliver came into the bed tent with his daughter Tracy. For a long moment there was a silence. Then the grizzled cowman spoke, his voice quiet-toned:

"Lorn Talford had me where he wanted me. When Jay Hooker found out Lorn was dead, he spilled it all. You don't know how big a favor you done me and my wife and my daughter Tracy. I hope we kin somehow pay back a little of the debt we owe you. You're a good man, Bryan. When you git back in shape, I'd be proud to have you ramrod this Mashed O outfit. From now on—Tracy will ride nurse-herd on you for a spell."

It was Tracy who had prodded the Association into hiring a range detective to catch Lorn. She'd mistaken Bryan for the man they had promised to put on the case.

Then while Bryan was talking to Tracy, and she sat there cross-legged on the ground beside his bed, she reached out and took hold of his hand and held onto it. And when the sheriff came into the bed tent she still hung onto Bryan's hand, and her eyes were dark and threatening. Greasy Ben had told her he was scared Bryan was on the dodge.

Bryan looked past the Montana sheriff at the tall grizzled sheriff from Alamogordo who had come in behind the Montana peace officer.

"I didn't git far." Bryan forced a grin.

The sheriff from Alamogordo chuckled. "You got far enough to git me a train trip. You left a plain trail all the way. I taken a chance on headin' you off. Matt Oliver tells me he wants to turn over his Mashed O outfit to you. Outside of the fact you got beat-up some an' shot a little, how do you like Montana, Bryan?"

"Don't josh a man when he's down."

"It's no josh. I got the three horse thieves that killed Stock Inspector Joe Cutter. They cleared you when they squealed. Unless you want to go back for their hangin', there's no need of you ever goin' back to New Mexico. Your slate's cleared.

"I knowed it'd be cleared when I give them cowhands the key to the jail to turn you loose. Me'n the Judge was in on that jail delivery. There's times when a sheriff or a judge has to use horse sense. Now if the young lady will quit lookin' at me like I was somethin' that had smallpox, I'll shake hands and say good luck. I was headin' you off to tell you the good news, Bryan. That's all."

Bryan asked the sheriff to thank Judge Lane and the cowhands that set him free that night at Alamogordo. He never wanted to go back to New Mexico.

Then Bryan said to Old Man Matt Oliver: "You said you hoped you could pay off that debt you figger you owe me. I'm holdin' you to it. I'm claimin' Tracy."

"You'll be marryin' the Mashed O outfit, Bryan."

"That's what I told Tracy."

"—When she asked you to marry her." The laughter twinkled in the cowman's gray eyes. "You'd never have asked the girl. Greasy Ben put her up to tacklin' you. Between 'em they team-tied you, Bryan. I'm still ahead of the game. I got a son-in-law."

Jay Hooker turned in his law badge and went back to his ranch to run it for a Mashed O line camp.

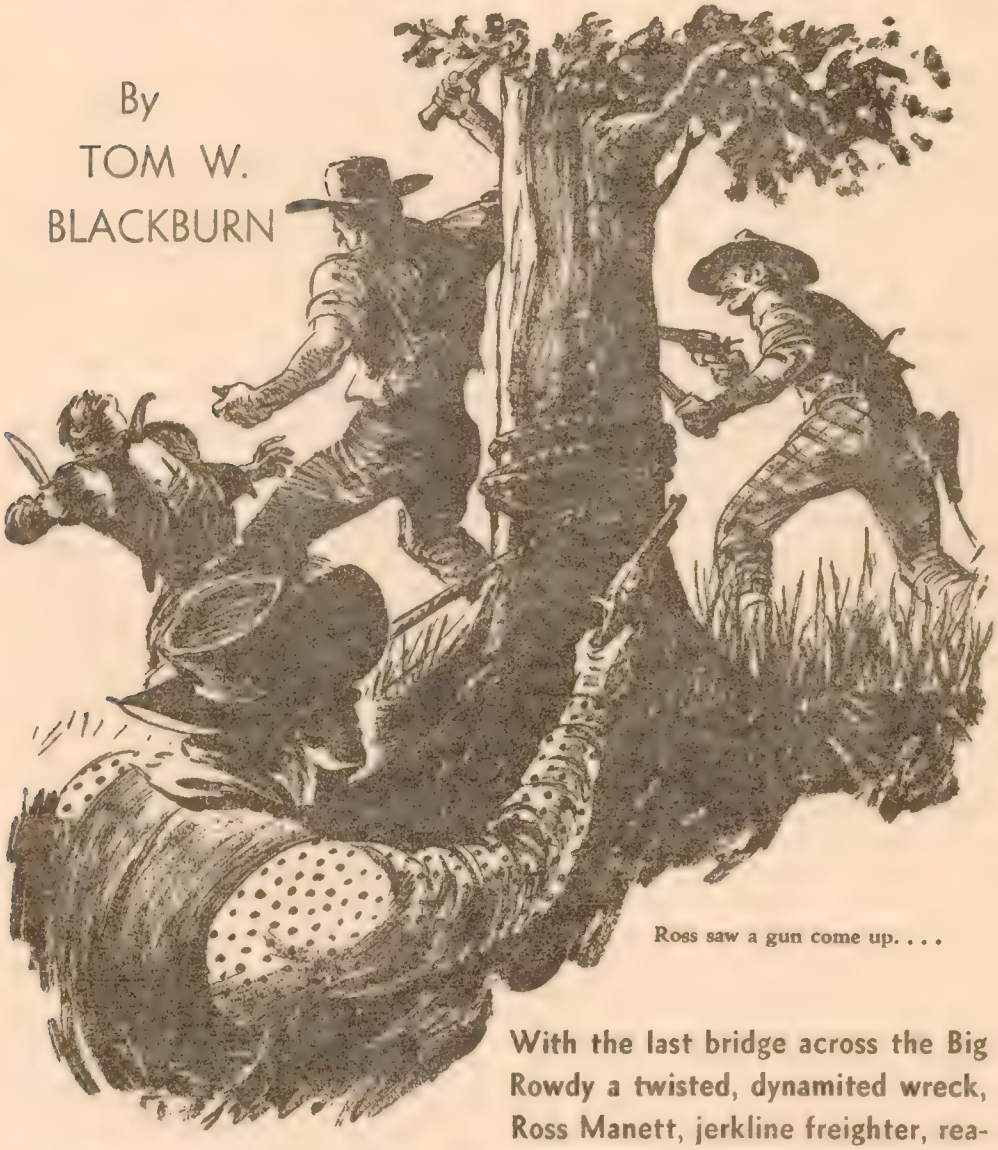
Old Man Matt Oliver was almighty proud when Greasy Ben stayed sober all during the wedding at the home ranch. And when he turned over the Mashed O to Bryan and Tracy for a wedding present he told Bryan never to let himself get fooled. The real ramrod of this outfit was the cranky ornery cook Greasy Ben.

And nobody would have wanted it any other way . . .

THE END

BUILD YOUR BRIDGES WITH GUNSMOKE!

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



Ross saw a gun come up. . . .

With the last bridge across the Big Rowdy a twisted, dynamited wreck, Ross Manett, jerkline freighter, reasoned that if you can't go over a river or under it, you can go straight across it—provided you've got the savvy and the blood-red courage to try!

ROSS MANETT jerked his horse up in front of Broome's smithy, swing to one side in his saddle, and hit the ground—anger stiffening every line of his body. Broome came into the doorway of his shop and waved. Manett

ignored the salutation. Broome was his friend and his business in Midford this afternoon was not with friends.

His boots rang sharply on the wooden walk and kicked hollow thunder from the steps of the Midford Merchandise Company store. Jared Meaver stood just within the doorway of the store, talking to Matt Tuckey and two teamsters. The conversation broke off abruptly at Manett's approach, and some of the customers in the big emporium looked around curiously.

Ross Manett had done a lot of talking to others about Meaver's operations in the valley of the Rowdy, and it looked as if this time he was going to talk to Meaver, himself. There were those who wanted to see this.

Manett stopped on widely planted feet in front of the Mercantile man.

"Meaver," he said tightly, "the bridge over the Rowdy between here and Joeburg collapsed last night."

"The hell!" Meaver said politely. "That's bad."

"Bad for me," Manett agreed. "I've got twenty freight rigs on the west bank, loaded with gravel for that railroad contract I took off your hands. With no bridge they can't get across. It'll take weeks to replace the bridge. Ten days of tying me up on that contract will break me. You figured this one out nicely."

Meaver glanced at Matt Tuckey and his men. He stiffened a little.

"Ross, I've got a belly-full of you picking quarrels with me. You got to lay every turn of bad luck to me? Be reasonable, man. A hot-head doesn't get you anyplace."

"We'll see," Manett growled. "We'll see how cool you sit when I'm finished with you. There wasn't any bad luck on the Rowdy for anybody until you came in here. Then all the good started going your way—because you turned it, Meaver.

"Specifically, your man Hensel stubbed his toe over that bridge. Some of the drifters he greased with cash to knock the spars out from under it spent their take in a Joeburg Saloon, and a little persuasion got their names down on paper. I've got affidavits to prove you bought that bridge collapse. This is a warning not to press me on the gravel contract. It's voided, far as I'm concerned, and I'm charging you rental on the rigs caught on the west bank until you've rigged a way to get them back across the river."

Matt Tuckey clamped a hand on Manett's arm.

"Ross, you're off your handle again," he warned. "You don't do anything, making noises like this. Quiet down!"

Manett twisted, throwing Tuckey's grip away, and he shoved hard against Matt's chest, driving him back against the counter. Meaver smiled.

"Your say-so and your luck doesn't void a contract. Not with me, Manett. You deliver gravel to the railroad at specified times and in specified amounts, or the bond you posted with me is forfeit. Business doesn't stop because a bridge is out."

ROSS took an angry step forward. Tuckey came off the counter and his two teamsters came with him. Ross braced himself. He hadn't meant to start swinging trouble, but by hell a bruised fist had a better feeling than complete helplessness.

He chopped at Tuckey. Matt ducked the blow. One of the teamsters shouldered Ross. Tuckey straightened and hit him over the eye. Almost simultaneously, the other teamster clubbed him mercilessly over the kidney. Tuckey banged his jaw.

It was a quick, crowding, thorough thing. The blow in the back partially paralyzed Ross. The clip on the chin stunned him. He pitched to his knees and folded helplessly forward on the floor.

Dimly, he heard Meaver's smooth voice.

"Sorry, folks. Don't like trade disturbed this way. Go ahead, the clerks will take care of you. Matt, you and the boys get this fizzled stick of dynamite out of here."

Ross was jerked to his feet and half dragged out the door. He tried to get his feet functioning, going down the steps, but he was thrown from the last one, forcefully, far out into the dust. He pulled his knees under him, but as his head came up, he saw Matt Tuckey look swiftly both ways and lift one heavily booted foot. Ross pulled his head between his shoulders and waited for the blow.

It didn't come. He raised his head again. Broome's big legs were straddling him. Broome was holding an unheaded length of sledge handle in one big fist, waving it toward Tuckey and his teamsters.

"You boys want to play rough, step up," Broome was saying quietly. "I've got a hankering to bust some good hickory on a couple heads I could name."

Tuckey swore, spoke shortly to his two men, and the three of them clattered up the steps of Meaver's store. Broome bent to lift Ross, but Ross came unsteadily up onto his feet under his own power.

"Boy, you got to learn to take troubles one at a time," Broome said quietly.

"I aim to!" Ross growled. "With Meaver for a starter."

"Now?" Broome asked. Ross glanced curiously at him. He had wanted the smith with him. He had wanted for months to crowd Meaver against the wall. But Broome was a slow man and he had shied away from any physical pressure. He had claimed any man had a right to business, so long as he kept it clean, and he had—along with the rest of the valley—refused to see the dirt under Meaver's nails.

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"So you're hit, too?" Ross asked. The smith nodded.

"Meaver is after my land. Wants to put a warehouse on it. He's operating just the way you claim he always does. Tuckey's wagons keep blocking my door when they're in town, so trade can't get to me. Hamill's mill has cut me off their stock supply list. No more iron and shoes. I didn't have to ask Pat Hamill to know a fire had got built under him."

"Meaver, all right," Ross agreed. He wiped at the dust and blood staining his face. There was nagging hurt in his back. He pulled himself into his saddle and patted the saddlebags behind him. "You take it easy, Broome. Just a couple of days. I'm tuning up a fiddle that'll make Meaver dance. Got the strings right here. Thanks for keeping Tuckey's boots out of my mouth."

Broome nodded earnestly and turned back down the street, using his sledge-handle like a walking stick—a big and deliberate man. Ross felt warmed that Broome would side him.

ROSS rode slowly on up the street toward the office of his freight company. He had faith in Midford and the valley of the Rowdy. He had come in when the rails first reached Joeburg, convinced that Midford and the valley would boom.

It was pretty country, thickly grown with trees on the slopes and the bottoms along the Rowdy rich as a man could wish. There was even mining beginning toward the headwaters of the river, and Midford would grow into a center of supply. Ross had put his money in a freight line, an immediate success.

Meaver came with his store and Ross welcomed him, although he had not liked the man. To grow, Midford needed more investment and more business, and Meaver's store was a big one. Ross had even welcomed Tuckey when Meaver staked the man to a rival freight line. It meant competition, but there was business enough for both.

Then Meaver began his sniping, one man at a time, one interest, one business. It was this sniping which had ruffled Ross Manett the first time. It was this sniping which had kept him in constant state of fury.

At the head of the street Ross dismounted before the Manett Freight Line office. A ledger was open on the desk in the outer room, bills stacked neatly beside it for posting. Cornelia was not in her chair. He dropped his saddlebags on the counter and stepped outside. The hostler in charge at the corral had come around for Ross's horse. Ross nodded at him as the man led the animal away.

A crooked path led on up the canyon from the head of the street—a canyon grown green with heavy ferns and all the silent beauty a tumbling river can bring out of the lush Oregon hills. There were some new cabins half a mile up the canyon path.

Cornelia Brill lived in one of them, tending a sick brother such free time as she had from her work in Manett's office. Ross had given her such freedom to come and go as she needed. He supposed she had gone up the canyon for a few minutes.

Turning back to the office, however, he saw her coming up the street from town. His neck warmed under his collar. If she had not seen the affair in front of Meaver's store, she would have heard of it. Cornelia had scant belief in the efficacy of a man's knuckles. He stepped on into the office.

Through a side window he saw his hostler come around from in back and start down the street. Probably cutting across to the Pot-Luck Bar, Ross thought, and made a mental note to call him on it, later. Whiskey and stock didn't mix.

Then Cornelia came in—a tall, slender girl in a faded dress, expensive and fashionable when she had left the East,

but a little threadbare now. She nodded with the proper deference of an employee to her boss and dropped into her chair. She turned to him. "I hear the Rowdy bridge is out," she said.

"And us with twenty wagons on the wrong bank."

"Alex Murphy stopped by," she went on. "He said that he has a carload of corrugated iron sheeting in Joeburg to be brought up."

"He'll have to wait."

Cornelia shrugged. She made no comment about the marks on his face or what she must have certainly heard in town.

"Alex also said something about being short a drum of cable on the last shipment we brought in."

"Don't see how," Ross said. "Still, Alex is reliable and what he says goes, far as I'm concerned. Might have spilled off over the tailgate of one of the rigs. We were loaded pretty high that trip. We need Alex's business. Have to replace the drum. But with the bridge out, I'll have to buy it from Meaver—and pay double."

The girl nodded. She straightened in her chair, leaning back a little.

"Ross, what are you going to do about the bridge and our marooned wagons?"

"What can I do?" he asked savagely. "There isn't a usable ford in twenty miles. The current and the rocks in the Rowdy would raise hell with a boat even if I could find one big enough to float a wagon. I can't build a bridge by myself. The rest of this miserable town is too busy lying on its belly, waiting for Meaver to step on it, to give me a hand. They figure I'm just blowing steam. Broome is the only one who gives a real damn. We're going busted, girl. We're whipped."

"There's got to be some kind of way across the river for the wagons, Ross. Can't you think of any?"

"Sure. Put wings on them and fly them across!"

The girl colored a little and shrugged. "I'm sorry, Ross. I thought the time for a man to get really angry was when his back was actually against the wall. I thought a man with red hair couldn't be whipped. I don't mean to be unreasonable, but—well, I guess this job means a lot to me. That's all."

"It means a lot to me, too," Ross said. The row she was hoeing wasn't easy. There wasn't too much work a girl could find in a place like Midford. She sure as hell couldn't work in Broome's smithy. Other available jobs were nearly as heavy.

The sick man in the cabin up the canyon took more than care. Cornelia needed work to keep going. She was a strong girl and a stubborn one. Ross looked at her across the desk, and thought vaguely that if he could get a little time out from his troubles, that admiration could amount to something else. He had an eye for horses and an eye for women. This one was built to a man's dreams.

"With me down on the river all morning, you haven't had a chance to look in on Bill," he said. "It's a little early, but I'll be here tonight. You can go along home, if you want."

"Thanks, Ross," she murmured. "As soon as I've finished this posting."

Ross remembered the hostler, then, and went out for a word with him. But the fellow hadn't returned.

Cornelia was neatly shuffling her papers together, when he re-entered the office. She put them away and quietly left.

ROSS swung his feet up to his desk top and considered the possible alternatives open to him. His first idea seemed best. With the affidavits he had collected in Joeburg, he thought he might make Jared Meaver back up a little.

If he was released from the terms of the gravel contract with the railroad—which Meaver had farmed off on him—he wouldn't be under quite so heavy pressure.

He might have time to circulate a little and get Midford and Joeburg both behind rebuilding the bridge. The bridge was, after all, not only a necessity to him but to both of the valley towns as well. If a bridge could be put in operation before his feed bills and payroll ate him up, Manett Freight Line could stay in business.

The affidavits seemed the answer.

Rising from the desk, Ross opened the saddlebags he had tossed on the counter. The left-overs of his lunch was in one. An extra tin of tobacco was in the other. There was nothing else. The affidavits he had skinned his knuckles to get in Joeburg were gone. He swore softly.

It was plain enough. Cornelia had spoken for her job. There could be no mistaking its importance to her. At the same time he had told her he was whipped. He hadn't meant that, of course.

She was right when she said there was always a little fight left in a red-haired man. His defeatism had been anger, sullen talk intended to fire himself up for further effort. But she had believed him.

The first place to go for a new job would be Meaver's store. Cornelia was a shrewd girl. She knew Meaver. She wouldn't go to him unless she had the makings of a deal. The affidavits had provided her with what she needed. There was no other way to account for the fact they were missing.

Manett ordered his thoughts carefully as he walked briskly up the canyon trail. He'd make Cornelia understand he hadn't quit yet. He'd assure her that as long as he was on his feet, her job was secure. He'd be gentle enough for her to see he understood her problem. When she'd returned the affidavits, he'd forget she'd ever taken them.

Cornelia was not at the cabin. Her brother said she had not yet come home. Ross swung rapidly back down the trail, anger mounting in spite of his resolve. The girl needn't have been in such a damned hurry that she couldn't wait until morning to see Meaver.

Now he had only one course—to go directly to Meaver. He would need a little cover for that, too, after the affair in the store this afternoon. He remembered the drum of cable Cornelia had mentioned.

Thinking of this, he remembered something else, and he began to laugh. Cornelia had told him about Murphy's cable. After she had quit him—after she had stolen the affidavits—something she had said gave him a better weapon than the signed slips.

AT DAWN, weary from a night's labor but satisfied with his efforts, Manett was on the Rowdy, a little downstream from the abutments of the wrecked bridge. He was wet from two swims in the river above the bridge. The taste of the whiskey he had bought for his foreman Mack Freedon, and some of his drivers, was stale in his mouth. His shoulders ached with driving a big saw through rough-milled lumber in a carpentry shop in Joeburg. But he was close to snapping Jared Meaver's squeeze off short.

Half a dozen of his wagon crew, including those he had employed to load gravel into his wagons, were gathered about him. He passed his orders.

"We're about set. Turn to and cut this bank down. Get a usable track right down to the water. Any man afraid of blisters on his hands sing out now and draw his time. Double pay for those who stick."

He singled out a lank, long-armed teamster and kicked a coil of manila line lying on top of the drum of cable. "Freedon and his boys will have their track down to the water on the other side in a few minutes. Ten dollars you can't get hemp across to him in one throw."

The man grinned. "You've lost ten bucks, Manett," he said.

Ross waved a bill at the man, shoved it back into his pocket, and started up the

bole of a heavy pine he had already selected, trailing a lifting line from his belt. The high air felt good against his cheek and the river looked neither swift nor treacherous from the air.

With others below to lash on what he needed, he worked at rigging a sling, anchored to the tree. While he was still up on the trunk, a four-span team came along the road from Joeburg, straining at traces hooked to a clumsy affair of stoutly nailed planking. It was a crude barge with a braced overhead beam holding big makeshift iron eyes, through which a cable could run easily. Ross was convinced it would work. The men with Freedon dragged it down to the water's edge.

The horses were unhooked and turned back ashore. Freedon's men turned shovels to work, smoothing the track dragged by the barge. Wagons loaded with gravel began to roll up behind it. Manett whistled shrilly from his position on the trunk of the tree, catching Freedon's attention on the far bank.

"Get your sling rigged, Mack!" Manett shouted. "Pick a sound tree and brace her solid."

Freedon waved understanding, and barked orders at his section of the crew. Ross came down the tree. A man came out of the brush back from the river—a man from Midford. He was carrying a length of unheaded sledge-handle in his hand, using it as a walking stick, and a frown of grave concern was between his eyes.

"Hell of a time locating you, Ross," Broome said. "Why didn't you let a man know?"

ROSS looked out across the river. "Think it'll work?" he asked the smith.

Broome considered preparations carefully. He nodded. "It if gets a chance."

"Something happening in Midford makes you think it won't?"

"No. That's trouble. Nothing happening. Nothing, that is, except the girl that's been working for you came down to your place this morning and moved all her stuff out of the office. Locked it up again and went down to the store. Been in there with Meaver, ever since."

"Not surprised," Ross said woodenly. "She's got her reasons, I reckon. We all got to pick sides and we all got to eat. Leave her out of it, Broome. What's Meaver doing?"

"Not a damned thing. Sitting like Hensel hadn't come in riding hard, damn' near burning up he was so excited over what he'd heard you were doing. Must have swum the river to get word across, and swimming takes more sand than I figured the ornery son had. Didn't turn a hair of Meaver's head. He won't sit tight. He can't afford to. You finish out that gravel contract and make him pay you off and he'll be sweating, sure."

Ross considered this. He shook his head. "Meaver could buy me out of that contract and not hurt himself. He's been doing plenty good."

"Sure," Broome agreed. "On the surface. He's crowded himself up quite a tally. Chris Bynum run out of his hotel. Pat Horlick shorted out of his hay and feed business. Jack Trumbo forced to drive a rig on a stage line that used to be his. A fire burning under Pete Hamill.

"But look, Ross. After I talked to you, yesterday, I went around to those boys. Wanted to see if we couldn't all add our count against Meaver together, like you've been preaching for months. We put together what we know and it came out this way—Meaver's spread himself too thin. Been growing faster'n he could get breeches to cover him.

"If he gets your stage line and merges it with the one Tuckey operates for him—if he completes your railroad contract and pockets your bond, forfeited, to boot—he'll come out of the woods. If he don't, he's going to up-end and sink."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Bynum and Horlick and Trumbo and Hamill and me. I tried to get the others to come along with me, but they've been burned and they wouldn't face up to the fire a second time. They want to see how you do before they move. I'm sorry, Ross. I give them everything but the hard end of this club—and they'd have got that, too, if busted heads would have done any good."

"Thanks, Broome," Ross said. "Now, since you're here, how about lending a hand? I want to start rolling my wagons across. If Meaver or any of his boys come up, maybe you'll have a little work for that hunk of hickory, still."

"I'd relish that," Broome said quietly.

He moved with a shovel in among those preparing a road to the barge landing. The teamster with the long arm earned himself ten dollars and came to collect. Mack Freedon's men dragged the line, and then the length of cable, across the Rowdy. They cinched it into their sling, and pulled it tight with a string of horses. Manpower inched the waiting barge into the water, and its guide rings were clamped over the cable. A wagon was run down to the opposite approach. Its team was outspanned. Gravity rolled it onto the barge.

Manett spoke quietly to the teamster who had lined up tow-animals on the Midfork bank. The tow-team moved. The barge crawled out into the rushing current of the Rowdy. Both anchor trees bent a little as the pressure of the current against the barge put a strain on the overhead guide-cable, but the barge moved surely across, dodging rocks.

It grated against the near bank. Other animals were waiting on the near shore. They dragged the loaded wagon quickly up the bank, rolling it with its load of gravel on down the Midford road. Broome came back to stand with Manett, grinning broadly.

"Like cutting cold iron with a new swedge," he said.

THERE was no warning. The attack came on both banks of the river at once. First an attempt to get at the hemp lashings which fanned out from each anchor-tree. Now gunfire for an instant. Then as Freedon realized what was happening on the far bank, the bang of a heavy gun.

Manett, startled by the men streaking toward his own anchor tree, saw only that the force against Freedon was chiefly diversionary, too few in number to give Mack much trouble. Then he was sprinting toward his own end of the cable.

Meaver had not before employed open violence in the valley of the Rowdy. But it was evident that he knew this kind of business. Broome had retrieved his club from the brush and waded up to the base of the anchor tree, swinging his length of hickory with a wide and wicked grin on his face.

He broke a man in the middle and split the head of another. As he ran, Ross saw a gun come up. He jerked his own weapon out and snapped a shot. The man with the gun went down, but there would be others. Broome was asking for a quick ticket out. But for the moment, he was also keeping knives from the ropes at the tree. If Ross could reach him. . . .

Traveling at a hard run, Manett ran full into a heavy rock thrown from the brush. It struck him on the breastbone, spilling him, knocking his gun away.

A man with a long knife was working in on Broome from the side. Ross hit him in a long, flying dive which brought fresh hurt to his torn chest.

Tuckey had come out of the brush and had quieted Broome with a gun shot. Ross swore at Tuckey. The man turned.

Tuckey swung a terrific, jolting blow with his free hand and it shook Ross to the soles of his feet. The knife he had

taken from Tuckey's teamster was keen and long. He thought it went clear through Tuckey's thick body, but he wanted to be sure. Broome fended him off.

"Easy, boy," the smith cautioned. "We don't have to kill them twice."

Panting, his throat still tight with desperation, Ross turned. There was no sign of violence on the far bank of the river. Mack Freedon's boys were rolling another wagonload of gravel down to the barge landing. On his own bank, Ross saw Chris Bynum, Pat Horlick, Jack Trumbo, Pete Hamill, Alex Murphy.

IT WAS A long moment before Ross saw Cornelia Brill standing a little to one side, near the base of the anchor tree, looking at the sprawled remnants of the violence which had flared on the riverbank. Manett blinked. Broome chuckled.

There were horses and rigs hastily halted along the riverbank where their owners had quitted them, all of the animals sweat-streaked.

"What the hell?" Ross muttered. The bunch with their backs turned opened up and he saw Jared Meaver in their midst, white-faced with anger. He swore again.

"We could string him up," Broome said thoughtfully. "The little lady fired the boys up hot enough to do it."

"Cornelia?" Ross grunted incredulously. Broome nodded.

"That's what Bynum told me. Sold Meaver on the proposition that she was moving over to him. Meaver talked too plain to her and she found out what he was up to. Soon's she got the chance, she rounded up the boys and tongue-whipped them into fighting."

Alex Murphy came up. "Fear of God's in Meaver this minute, Ross. Gave him that proposition you've been pounding at us—that we bunch up on shares and buy him out at a fair wholesale figure. He's for it. Says he'll release you on your gravel contract and let you finish it direct with the railroad. Anything else we should hook him for?"

"Just proof he's got enough cash in his kick to get him a ticket clean out of Oregon before the next train rolls through Joeburg. And say, Alex, Cornelia told me yesterday I owed you a drum of cable."

"Cable?" Murphy said perplexedly. "Hell, man, I didn't lose any cable from a shipment. You're crossed. If you want me to take it off your hands, all right. See you about it, directly. This minute, I've got to look at a man down with a bullet. Your squint-eyed hostler, Ross."

Manett glanced at Broome helplessly. A man could be such a damned fool. He had thought Cornelia Brill was selling him out. He had thought he was being very smart, warping a chance remark of hers into this plan. Suspecting her of rifling his saddlebags. The hostler had done that.

He had even seen the man start across the street with the missing affidavits and had thought nothing of it, beyond marking down a lecture on drinking during hours.

He'd been too busy building a case against the girl to wonder why the hostler hadn't come back.

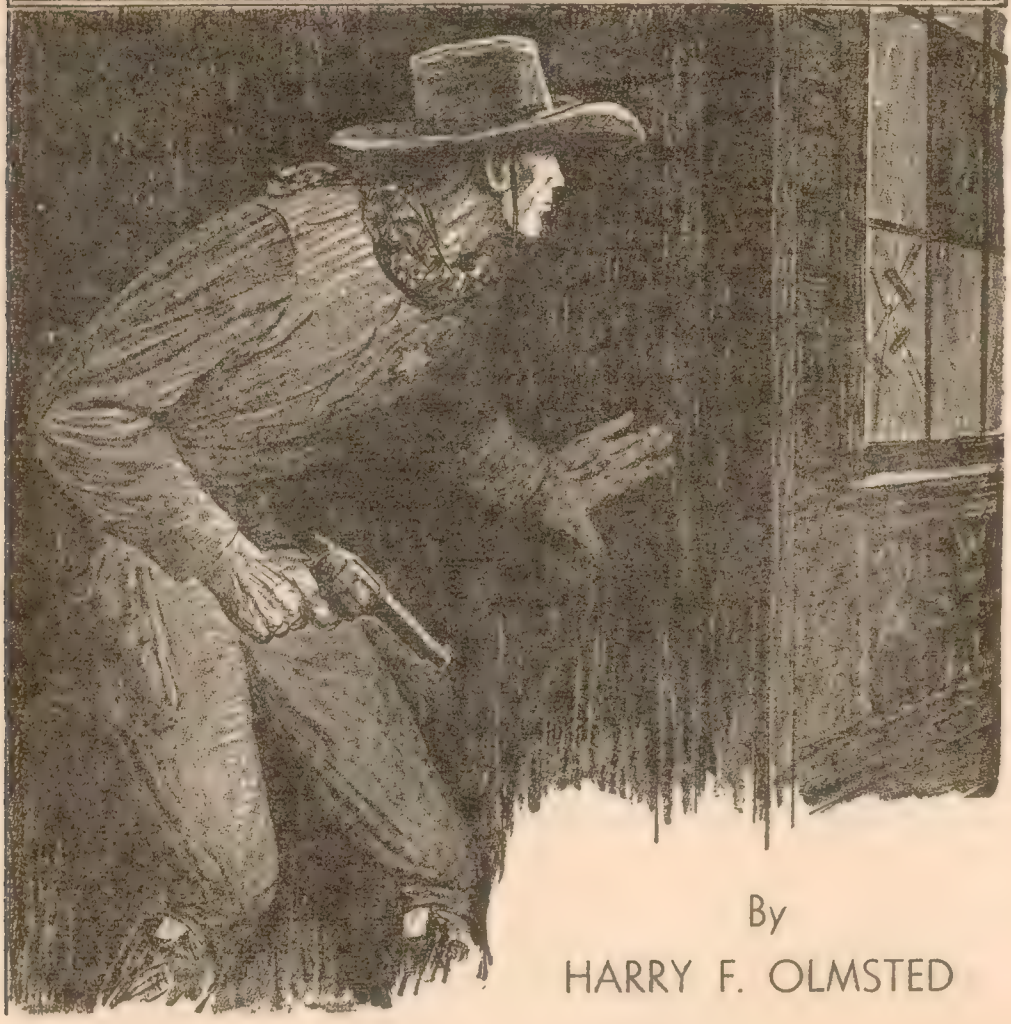
Alex Murphy hadn't lost any cable. Maybe Cornelia hadn't known the mechanics of getting across the Rowdy, but she had worked on an idea—and she had planted it in his head.

This was the kind of woman a man liked to have working for him—like hell! This was the kind of woman a man wanted.

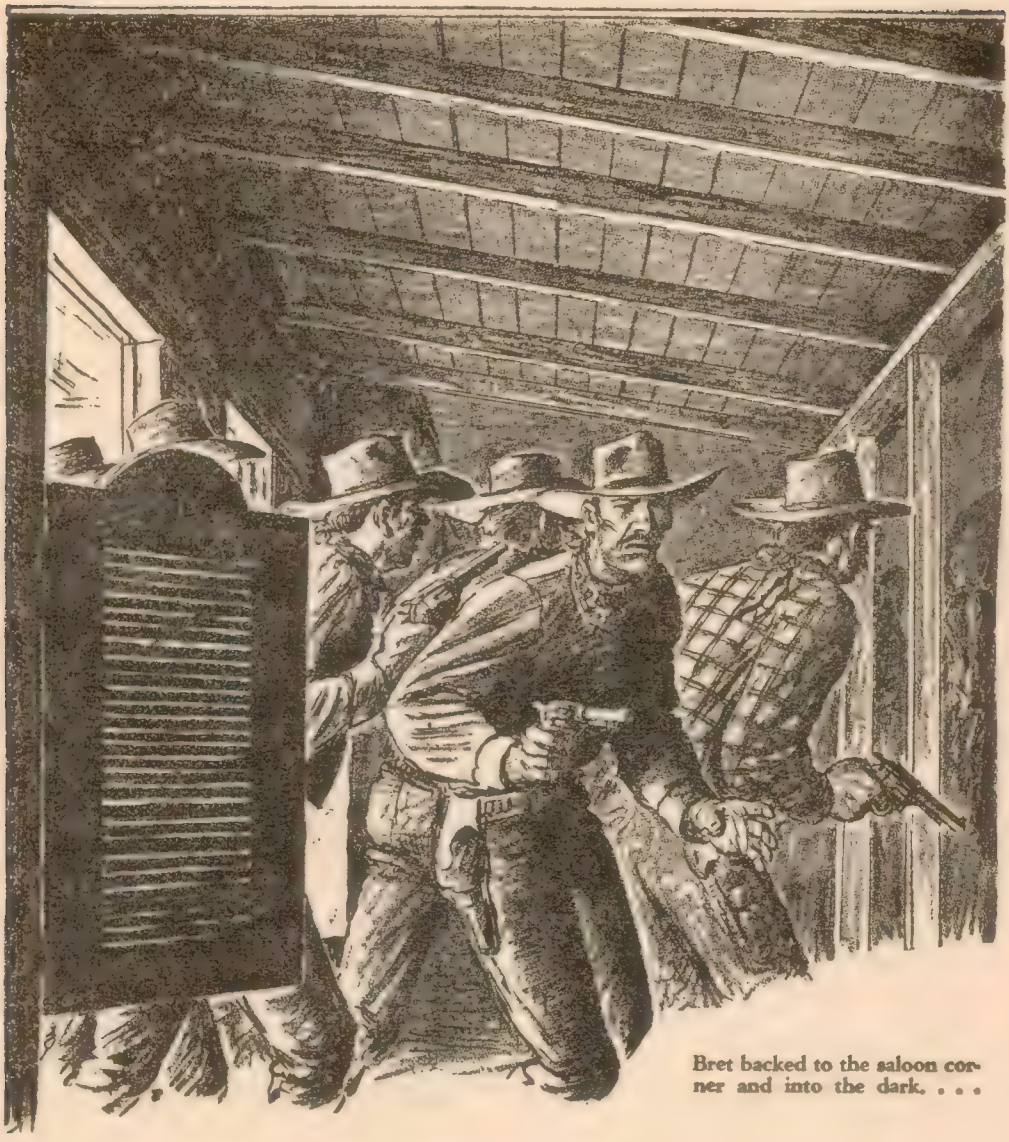
He started toward Cornelia Brill. She saw him coming and stepped back into the brush. He liked that. It was a fine thing to have Midford down here to help him wind up Jared Meaver and his boys. But there was some business on his mind that he'd as soon transact in private and he had a notion Cornelia knew what that business was. She'd be waiting for him among the ferns.

The Night Helltown Went Mad

Empire City on the Border. . . . Smoldering hell of killer-wolf outcasts, bounty-hunting murderers, Border gun-runners, and half a hundred honest townsfolk. McQuaid, whose strange and thankless job it was to save the town from the man it feared, had to deliver it into the hands of a man it would hate!



By
HARRY F. OLMSTED



Bret backed to the saloon corner and into the dark. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Stranger in Helltown

TWO KINDS of people saw McQuaid enter Empire City—those whose faint hopes depended on strangers, and those to whom a stranger was a menace. It was sundown. A hot breeze rustled the lazy cottonwoods. Against the westering sun McQuaid and his high sorrel pony were briefly silhouetted. Then he came down the gentle slope into Fort Street and turned into Cleve Densham's Feed Barn.

Presently he reappeared on the street—a steely, flat-muscled man, dust-grimed from long riding. His hat hung back from

its chinstrap and the breeze toyed with sun-bleached hair and sun-bronzed cheeks. He was young. Mellow humor twisted his thin lips. His pale eyes were slow and careful as they appraised the town.

On the porch of Square Lockett's Saloon, Jeremiah Graime roused from his afternoon siesta, staring. Jeremiah, affectionately known as the "Father of Empire City," had seen many riders top yonder skyline and enter town. Good men and bad. Desperate men. Laughing men. All lonely and goaded by terror.

Jeremiah failed to note backtrail fear in this stranger. He noted his high-belted gun, his quick placing of stores and saloons, steepled churches, smithy and ragged line of houses reaching back. These things were doubly meaningful to Jeremiah.

McQuaid came across the dusty street, his glance at the fat little old man a brief and searching thing. He was passing into the saloon when Jeremiah said, liplessly:

"Card room on the right, straight back. Take your trail drink there." He heaved his bulk erect, glancing over the flapping batwing doors. The stranger had turned to look back, curiosity bunching his bleached brows, rash temper simmering in him. Jeremiah said: "Careful does it, my friend," and turned down the steps.

Jeremiah would have turned off the boardwalk and between buildings, but a man came quartering toward him—a stocky, solid striding little man whose dark eyes held the old timer with a narrowed interest. "Who's that feller, Jerry?"

Jeremiah stared coolly at the broad face, cruel eyes and brutal strength of this pompous sheriff. He thought: Kin Goroway's scairt of strangers despite his blowed-up airs. Wisht I knowed why.

What he said was: "Should I know him, Sheriff?"

"You talked with him, didn't yuh?"

"Answered a civil question, that's all. Any crime answering civil questions?"

"Mebby." Goroway stroked his chin. "Got your back up, ain't yuh? What'd he ask yuh?"

"Where to eat," lied Jeremiah. "I told him Amy Joiner's Horseshoe. That bad?"

THE lawman smiled. "Keep your shirttail tucked in, Jerry. That feller's here for no good—I know the signs. I'm takin' a look at his pony."

"Nobody slickers you, Goroway." Humor twisted Jeremiah's mouth as he watched the man stride toward the barn. Instinctively he compared him to Sheriff Otis Joiner, his old friend who had been slain in last fall's election upheaval. Kinsey Goroway couldn't hold lanterns for Otis Joiner, anyway you sized him.

Knowing he might be watched, Jeremiah entered the Antlers, drank a beer, swapped jokes with the bartender and went out the back. Moments later, hearing whiskey being poured beyond the Lockett Saloon's rear panel, he entered and closed the door. Bret McQuaid was tilted back with his glass, smiling. "Yeah?"

"Jeremiah Graime means nothin' here today," said the old timer. "But once he was Mister Empire City, ownin' the town an' runnin' it friendly. Sold heaps uh lots an' turned plenty business deals. Made a half a million an' lost it when the Tucson bank went bust. I ain't stony broke, but—"

"Interestin' life story, but why tell me?" drawled McQuaid.

"Pshaw, I plumb forgot you read the details in my letter. I tried to make our problem plain, Lyle. Anything you didn't understand in the letter—"

"Letter?" McQuaid's eyes were more than faintly puzzled. "Oh, sure. But—"

Jeremiah silenced him. "Steady, boy. Look us over an' if you can handle it, say the word an' I'll fork over, trustin' you. 'Druther eat hog slop free than to grow rich knucklin' to them sidewinders. Way

they're watchin' an' knowin' Elmo hadn't got back home, I feared they might have stopped him."

"They got him," McQuaid said, coldly. "Shot him—and not a Chinaman's chance for Elmo."

It hit Jeremiah hard. "Poor old feller swamped spittoons for Square Lockett. Between kicks, he dreamed of a good horse. I reckon he died happy, at that. It's another debt for you to square, Lyle."

Unrest tightened McQuaid's cheeks. "Look here! I'm not Oklahoma Lyle."

"Course not. That wouldn't do. What'll we call you?"

"Name is—oh, what difference? Call me Slim—Arizona Slim."

"Good." Jeremiah shook his hand, withdrew his grasp leaving a yellow-back bill in McQuaid's fingers. Biggest bill he'd ever seen. "Thousand on account, Slim. For Haverty Gannt—a sly one who hires others to do his dirty work. The sheriff'll be easy. He loves layin' on hands, rubbin' the hair wrong, daring a man. He'll look you up. When the shootin' starts, I'll have tough hands to side you. Now go get a room at the Tanner an' supper at Amy Joiner's Horseshoe. They're both tiptop."

McQUAID left Lockett's Saloon, feeling bested. Nothing could have convinced Jeremiah he wasn't Oklahoma Lyle—the phantom killer whose guns had turned many a range battle. And McQuaid did possess that letter.

Funny about that. Not far back, Bret had seen a hat lying in the trail. Pretty good hat, too, but too small. The letter was neatly folded in the crown. A mile farther, Bret found Elmo Vernon and his horse beside the trail—both dead and quite unlovely after four-five days in the sun. Cigarette butts and empty .45 shells revealed where the assassins had bushed. It was none of Bret's business, so he had ridden on.

Possession of that letter—engaging a killer to restore Empire City's lost freedom—confirmed Jeremiah's snap identification. Bret, allowing nothing to jeopardize his own grim quest, avoided making an issue of it. The twisting trail had been long. Here, taking root at last, was a man he didn't know, who didn't know him. A man who would surely spook at the echo of the name Bret McQuaid.

Bret's spurs sang faintly. Posted men, their faces bleak, suspicious, watched with dismal readiness. It was an aged pattern—a strong, ruthless man had taken over. But, with the conquest incomplete and objects unrealized, fear still clung to him.

Bret entered the Tanner House, registered, climbed rickety stairs with his bedroll. Lighting a lamp, he scrubbed up, shook his clothes and, looking less the saddle bum, returned to the darkening street. Entering the stable as if to attend his pony, he continued on through, strode up the alley and climbed the outer staircase. A light struck under the door of his room. Silently, he entered.

The man at the bed whirled from Bret's rifled bedroll. The face was contorted. The shoulders settled and his gun hand poised. The dark eyes, aflame with belligerence, smoky with fear, weighed the tall figure in the doorway. In the powerful giant showed no guilt that he—the sheriff of Empire City—had been caught rumaging the effects of another man. Noting McQuade was relaxed, his enigmatic smile hardly a symbol of danger, the sheriff eased off.

"Didn't hear you come in," he muttered.

"That's plain," said McQuaid. "Anything interesting there? You're welcome."

The lawman glared, stung by the stranger's faint scorn. "Gotta be almighty sure of pilgrims beddin' here, Mister Arizona Slim. Your name's a phony. Your pony's wearin' a vented Triangle A—probably stole. We don't welcome your kind of strays, fella. Better fork that

sorrel riddle an' get yourself all the way out of here."

"Presently, sheriff. Nothing here to make me want to remain, buried or unburied. But I got business and when it's finished, I'll—"

"Business? What sorta business?"

"You don't hear good, sheriff. I said *my* business."

The lawman looked him up and down. "Before you've been here too long, my owl-feathered friend, you'll find that any man's business is the business of Sheriff Kinsey Goroway an' subject to the closest—"

He broke off. Suddenly the stranger had thrown back his head and was laughing in a full-bellied way, filling the room with reckless mirth. Goroway watched him, anger in him slowly growing. When McQuaid loosed a high whoop, he stepped in swinging his meaty palm to McQuaid's face. The blow checked the laughter, and it would have felled McQuaid except that he drove into the wall, righted himself and squared about. He was looking into the muzzle of the sheriff's gun.

Malice danced in McQuaid's eyes. "I'm glad you did that," he gritted. "It'll make killing you that much easier. Holster your gun, touch my palm and then draw. Hell's for the slowest man, Goroway."

The sheriff looked at him over the leveled gun, his face sharp and red. His eyes had a green shine. "Why should I fight you, Slim? If I win, I've killed a bum that needed killing. I get no credit. If I lose, I leave you free to do that business you spoke about, and that business I aim to stop. Don't let the sun rise on you here, Slim. That's good advice."

He was opening the door, backing out. His tread was light on the stairs, descending. McQuaid closed the door and sat on the bed, rubbing his cheek. His thoughts suddenly brought on laughter.

"What a hell of a crazy joke," he laughed. "A sleeping fool and his undrawn guns!"

CHAPTER TWO

End of a Twisted Trail

THE mood passed, leaving Bret shaken, bleak. He'd given more than a year of his life to this chase—since his return from squiring a train-load of beef to Chicago. There had been love in his heart and money in his jeans that day when he rode to tell Libby he had signed a contract to rod a fine Dolores River spread. And that there was no further reason for delaying their marriage.

But he hadn't found Libby home. She'd gone East to visit kinfolks, her father had told him, but truth wasn't in his voice nor directness in his gaze.

Bret poured it on, pressuring the Vallecito farmer, until he got the truth. A newly-hired hay-hand—Kinsey Goroway—had paid violent court to Libby. She had spurned him right up to the hour she announced she was going away with him, to be married at the Heber home of Goroway's people. No argument could touch her. When she took her leave, she was pale, cold of hand, uncommunicative.

It hit Bret hard. A woman should be privileged to marry whom she pleased. Libby wasn't the pallid, nervous type. The fear she had showed her sire meant something, and Bret was stubborn enough to learn what. He lit out for Heber. Goroway's folks—solid Mormons who refused to compromise with sin—had not seen Kinsey since disowning him when he abandoned a wife and two children. They wanted never to see him again. Now Bret worried for Libby's safety. Returning to Vallecito, he picked up the cold trail.

It led him south and west. The trail was always dim and hard to follow, at times trackless. At Farmington, a man answer-

ing Goroway's description had stolen two horses. In Gallup, he stuck up a poker game, escaped with a thousand dollars. Prescott jailed him for wife-beating. In Wickenburg he robbed and killed a storekeeper. Pursuit roared toward Coldwater Station but Goroway and his woman dared the waterless Harquahala-Eagle Tail-Lechuguilla Desert. His fiendish luck holding, Goroway made it across the blistering Papagueria to the Mexican town of Santana, in the Altar. There Bret found Libby.

The priest at the little mission had prepared Bret for what he would find at the rude *ramada* of the kindly goat-herd who had taken her in. The goat-herd, continually waving back his curious, half-naked flock, talked to Bret.

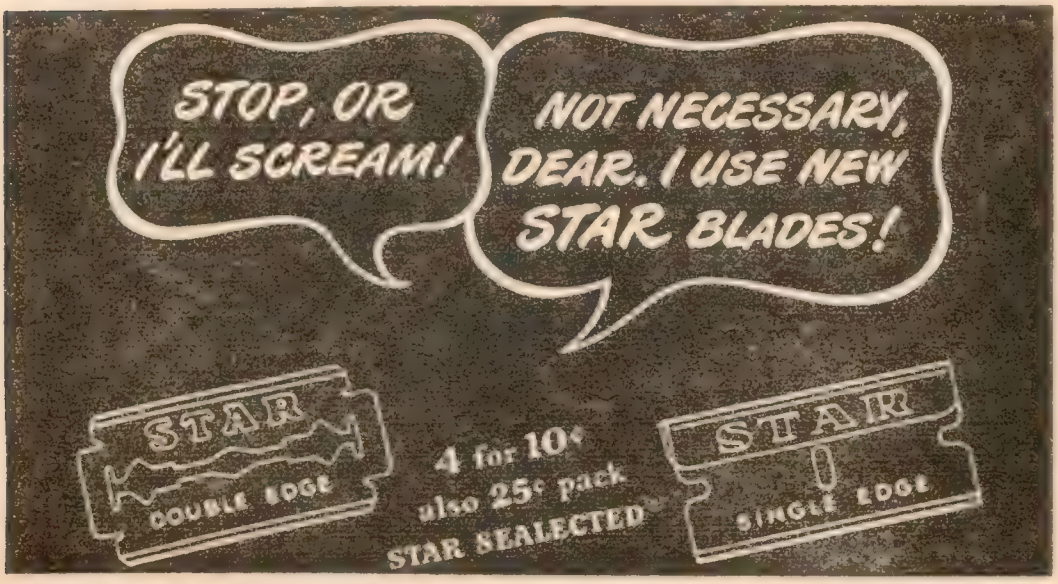
"Thees man ride here," he explained, "and take the señora off the 'orse. He set her on the ground and ride away, weethout a word. There ees a baby coming, so I leave that for my *esposa* and run for the padre. The baby ees born dead, señor. The señora ees ver' seek. The padre administers the *rito ultimo* and now—you come see."

She lay on a pallet of goatskins, so thin, so gray beneath the burn of the sun. Not the vital girl Bret had known, but a weak and wasted wreck—frowzy haired, her front teeth missing, her skin wrinkled like old leather. The señora woke her from a stupor and she blinked, staring at Bret and trying to smile.

"Bret, darling!" she croaked. And then a terrible fear struck her sunken eyes. "Watch out, Bret. He—he's crazy, I think. Deadly. He'll kill—" She drew a sharp breath as blighting pain hit her. Then, like a passing breeze, she was dead.

Bret buried her close by, left money with the goat-herd and rode on. His quest now was more grim and no less determined. Nothing mattered now but to overtake Goroway and kill him. The goat-herd had asked Bret in great puzzlement: "W'at kind of man ees thees?" Bret couldn't answer that, unable to reach low enough to get a word. Goroway must die quickly.

The solemn oath was one thing—carrying it out something else. Goroway had far greater mobility now and he covered plenty of ground. Chiefly because of his acts of lawlessness, Bret followed his trail through Tucson, Deming and on to



El Paso. There it came to a dead end. Bret spent months along the Rio Grande, wasted months. Now and again he must halt, take any kind of a job he could find, earn a few dollars and go on. This man hunt became an obsession. After ten fruitless months, his first real lead came from a Mexican Border Guard.

"Goroway," the man had repeated. "Not a common name, señor. A brother of mine, riding with the Border Patrol west of Nogales, tracked a smuggler across the Border without the formality of papers. He found his man in a town called Empire City and was killed trying to arrest him. The man who killed him was named Goroway. An investigation was ordered but nothing came of it." His eyes had glittered at Bert. "I have had it in mind, señor, to take a leave and square an unpaid debt with Señor Goroway."

"Don't bother," Bret had told him. "I'll think of your brother when I pay Goroway off for another open account." He had ridden at once for Empire City. Within an hour of his arrival, he had faced the man he sought—without realizing it. And that man was *Sheriff Kinsey Goroway.*

Bret fingered the thousand dollar note in his pocket and laughed again. A thousand dollars to kill Goroway! A thousand stinking dollars!

BRET blew out the lamp and descended the stairs to the hotel lobby. The sudden and unexpected ending of his search found him without plans. He had never considered his quest in any other terms but as an ultimate meeting of right and wrong, with right coming out on top.

But here, in Empire City where Goroway was the law, gun hirelings watched the town for any possible opposition to Goroway and Haverty Gannt, the town boss. To kill one or both would be to die immediately. Bret's mind had never probed that deep into the matter of vengeance.

He stepped into the Horseshoe Counter to find a late smattering of supper trade. Behind the counter, Amy Joiner turned from her stove to look at him. McQuaid's glance went to her and he saw the orderly red hair with the yellow silk band, the saucily upturned nose with its freckles. He saw the curving beauty of her and drank it in.

Not unconscious of his appraisal, Amy paused to brush her hot face with a kerchief, tilting her chin a little and returning his stare. No word was spoken. Between them now was a force greater than either, a reckless, warming force that reached out for Jeremiah Graim. It brought back recollection of the old life he had known, before he had started in his grisly quest.

The girl came to him, her eyes soberly watchful and her lips smiling as she reeled off the supper options. Bret ordered and watched her with appreciation. She was a capable girl and a pretty one.

The door opened and a man came in, a powerfully muscled man with a great shock of iron-gray hair, long side burns and a flowing mustache. The bulge at the rear of his tight-fitting coat was both flesh and iron. Haverty Gannt was a strong man, hating weakness and preying upon it wherever he could. Behind him came Goroway, an oily and prideful smile on his darkly handsome face—a bulldog attending a mastiff.

Amy brought Bret's steak and poured his coffee. Gannt, letting his eyes run along the counter, looked at Bret. Annoyance edged his voice. "Who the hell is that fellow, Kin?"

Goroway laughed. "The one I told you about, Chief. Somebody Old Jerry's imported."

Jeremiah set his cup down. "Pretty sure of your guesswork, ain't you, Kinsey?"

Goroway laughed contentedly again, but

there was no laughter in Gannt. His face was sharp with the fierce curiosity inside him, and he did not shift his hard and careful scrutiny. It was as if he saw something in Bret that was hidden to the rest, something of deep significance.

Bret laid down knife and fork, meeting the man's stare. "Some day," he said, tartly, "you'll accept hearsay on a man and get your head kicked off. There's a fair and honest way to find out about a man; but of course you wouldn't know about that."

Gannt's eyes blazed as they ran over Bret—mean, crafty, careful. "Lippy, very lippy, for one so plainly needful of walking soft. You'd do well to start with the idea that Haverty Gannt makes the rules around here—*and* enforces them."

"Mebbyso," said Bret, deceptively soft. "Mebbyso not."

Gannt laughed. "Kin," he said, "this perverse upstart's got his back up like a scratching cat. Seems like I'll have to convince him. Oh, not here, Amy. I have an interest in not damaging the Horseshoe. Set me out a porterhouse, fried spuds, coffee and pie. No change of heart yet, I suppose?"

"No change of heart," said Amy, tight-lipped.

Gannt shook his head. "Too bad. Such a good cook, too."

Amy turned to her stove, white-faced and shaking with fury.

CHAPTER THREE

Oklahoma Lyle

WOLFISHLY hungry when he had first entered the lunch room, Bret found anger dulling his appetite now. He ate slowly, deliberately. Gannt's challenge had been plain and he would make the next move. Unless Bret was cool, calm and unangered when the test came, he was finished.

Taking time with the meal, Bret let his mind gallop. Gannt's quick antagonism wasn't connected with Bret's personal quest—of that Bret was sure. Whatever lawless and godless projects he had on the fire, Gannt was plainly one who couldn't abide interference with his nocturnal comings and goings across the Border. Any stranger who could not or would not satisfy him as to his antecedents must expect a clash.

Once the Border had smiled at the petty smuggler and shady dealer who called himself Haverty Gannt. That was in the day when law was worn at the hip and a man found no interest in the affairs of others if they did not affect him adversely. But times had changed. Rangers lined the Border. Patrols watched both sides of the Line. Gannt had grown strong.

Crimes against two governments had roused fear in him, fear made more poignant by lack of faith in those upon whom he must depend. In seizing power here, he was putting his back against the wall. Only by ruthlessness could he hope to survive; he knew that. And such ruthlessness must finally destroy him. He knew that too.

Gannt and Goroway were finishing their dinners when a cavalcade came galloping past the Horseshoe. They were smugglers here to report to Gannt—thirsty men, alkali-powdered from long riding. Gannt jabbed Goroway, rose and tossed a golden coin on the counter.

"Nice steak, Amy," he gruffed and led the way out. The last two diners were right behind except for Jeremiah. Bret was left alone with the straight-gazing daughter of the murdered sheriff—Otis Joiner.

She stood before her cookstove, the heat and rigors of the day a slight tarnish on her beauty. She was looking at him, her smile soft and womanly, her hazel eyes revealing something he couldn't read. But

she was so proud and good to look at that he ignored the subtle mystery of her eyes.

"Is Empire City always this dead, lady?"

"Anything Haverty Gannt touches is dead and buried. Or playing possum."

"Hm." Bret grimaced. "Isn't there a dance or something in the Opera House I can take you to?"

"No. Nothing like that any more. When dad was alive, he encouraged that sort of fun, but—and even if there was, I wouldn't dare go with you now. Did you have to shoot off your mouth at him? Did you have to mark yourself for a bullet in the back?"

Bret's eyes danced. "Some women would walk shoulder to shoulder with their men in spite of bullets back or front."

"Of course. But you are not my man."

His smile was rash. "Worse luck. Oh, but you could be lady, and—by jingoes, I'll work on it."

"The best thing you can do, mister, is to get on your horse and go far away. You don't know this outfit like I do. You're on Gannt's blacklist. If you stay here, you'll die. Go tonight. Now."

"And leave such a—?"

"I know, I know." She fell to wiping off her counter, her eyes scornful. "Such a beautiful girl. My teeth are like pearls. My hair is spun gold and my eyes are pools of loveliness. I'm too fine a girl to be working for a living. I rate a loving husband and a nice little home on the first street back. I've heard it all before, mister, and it rolls off me like water off a duck's back. That meal was a dollar."

Bret was grinning. "Please, lady. Don't put words in my mouth." He shoved out the money. "Do you work all the time? Couldn't I see you tomorrow?"

She shook her head, an irony at the corners of her mouth. "Tomorrow, barring a miracle, you will be dead. And I—I'll be obeying orders like a good soldier—turning my lunch over to a painted floosie. Yes, tomorrow I'll be shaking the dust of Empire City from me forever, taking the afternoon stage out and counting myself lucky to be getting out. If I do."

A rising wildness went through Bret McQuaid. "I get the picture all right. And while you're packing in the morning, don't bet any important money that the age of miracles is past."

He looked across the Horseshoe at Jeremiah Graime, whose grizzled head lay on outstretched arms, as if he were asleep. Bret knew he was not. "When you wake your friend Jerry up, lady, tell him he picked the wrong man. Old Elmo didn't get twenty-five miles out of Empire. I took the letter out of his hat. Tell him it's a deal—not with Oklahoma Lyle, but with Bret McQuaid—from Colorado."

HE TURNED out through the door. Almost instantly, Jeremiah raised startled eyes. "Cripes, gal, I—"

Her laugh tinkled. "That's good, Jerry. You come here to see the brutal killer—Oklahoma Lyle. You dear, chivalrous old knight. That boy has been pulling your leg. He's no killer but there's something deadly working in him. Don't you think—uh—that you should trail along and look after him?"

"Good lord, yes!" Jeremiah clapped on his hat, hitched his gunbelt and went out. Amy's shoulders slumped and her hands came up to cover her face. For a long minute, her slender form shook with silent weeping.

Then, straightening, she locked up and pulled the shade. She looked at the dirty pots, pans and dishes, was tempted to leave them as they were for her successor. Then her jaw stiffened and she rolled up her sleeves and went for the dishpan.

When Bret hit the street, he moved out of the Horseshoe light and paused, keening the night like a wolf. There was no moon. The stars struggled faintly with a

ground haze. Empire City was hushed, as if waiting men were holding their breath low. Looking along the walks, checkerboarded with rectangles of light from dusty panes, Bret knew he was being watched. For him, the place held sinister threats. He was puzzled as to how he might bring them into the open.

Behind him, the Horseshoe door opened and closed and Jeremiah came along the walk, his tread heavy and springless. He sensed Bret standing there in the gloom. He halted, threw his hand to his gun. "Who's that?"

Bret shuddered at the target he made. "It's McQuaid," he called, softly. "Come here." And when the old timer had moved up beside him: "A kid could have potted you there with a toy bow and arrow. You got reason to think they'll be laying for you?"

"Of course." Jeremiah wrenched off a hunk of plug, rammed it into his cheek. "If Gannt don't like a man he sets forth to kill him—he don't know no other way. It's too much to ask that I take him along with me when I go, but at least I can be ready. Was that gospel you told Amy? Or was you takin' the sting outa your own name, fer hooraw purposes?"

"Truth. Cross my heart. Oklahoma never heard of your troubles, Graime."

The old fellow took a moment to digest that. "I'm sorry, McQuaid. I reckon it was my fault, bein' as anxious as I was to get Oklahoma here an' in action. Hard as it hits me, you're the one that's really hurt. I've pitchforked you right into the middle of a killin' unless you get smart an' clear now. If you can, that is."

"Reckon I could, if I wanted to. But I've been a year and more on the trail of the gent posing as the boss pistoleer of this pleasant gang rodding Empire City. I'm not leaving here till I kill him. If I don't kill him, I won't be leaving—ever."

"Goroway?" whispered Jeremiah.

"Goroway."

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"Cripes!" The old timer had Bret's arm in a steel grip. "I hope none of them was snoopin' around an' heard that, McQuaid. We wouldn't get a block if they knew."

"I don't mind if they do know it, now," said Bret, recklessly loud.

"Sh-h-h-h!" Jeremiah looked nervously around. "You're either awful fast or a plumb tough guy." He paused, hearkening to a saloon clock chiming eight o'clock. "So late, eh? I got a meeting. You come along too."

"Where?"

"Citizens' Committee. I was supposed to fetch Oklahoma Lyle. But since you're subbin' for him—"

"Lead out," said Bret, and, shoulder to shoulder, they crossed the street and vanished in the narrow, drafty vault between two buildings.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rule of the Rope!

INTO the Lacey Pulliam Saloon came Murley Bunions, the little pinch-faced derelict they called "Corns." He came cringingly into the smoke-filled turmoil of the barroom, his sunken eyes roving nervously. His glance picked up Gannt. The great man sat in his shirt sleeves, cards in his fist, a big cigar screwed into the corner of his mouth, chips before him, and a gun lying suggestively beside the chips.

With him were Sheriff Goroway, Luscio Martinez—a well-known bandido from Sonora—and his lieutenants. The sight terrified Corns and he made to turn back. But Gannt had seen him.

"Corns! Come here!"

The mousy little barfly jerked ahead. He halted before Gannt, head hung, eyes flighty, knees shaking. He shuddered at Gannt's thundered: "Well! Speak up!" And when he could not command a voice, Gannt poured a drink, watched the little man gulp it greedily. "Why ain't you out there watching, like you agreed? What you doing in here? What's the matter?"

"I—I lost 'em, Mister Gannt. You see, I—"

"Oh, to hell with your excuses!" Gannt spat on the floor. "I should have put somebody out there I could depend on. Where'd he go? How'd you lose him?"

Corns brightened. "Well, he come out of the Horseshoe an' stood in shadders, like he was watchin' somebody. Ol' Jerry come out an' they got together an—"

"Like I been telling you, Haverty," broke in Goroway. "That gunnie's drawin' pay from Jerry's crowd."

"Shut up, Kin!" snapped Gannt. "Go on, Corns."

The small eyes of Murley Bunions glowed with self-importance. "I crept closter to 'em, heard the stranger say the name he gave Amy was correct, that Oklahoma never knowed anything about Jerry's troubles. Jerry allowed then that he was sorry he'd pitchforked the stranger into this mess. The stranger laughed, sayin' it was a pleasure to ketch up with the gent he'd trailed all the way from Colorado."

"Colorado?" Goroway straightened, his black eyes suddenly sharp and wary. "Colorado, Corns? Did he mention a name?"

"That orta be worth a couple drinks, Kin. Ortn't it?"

Goroway snorted, flung him a silver dollar. "It'll be worth a punch in the nose if I find you're makin' this up. Now talk!"

"They whispered the name," grinned Bunions, pocketing the coin. "It was Goroway. Jerry told him if the sheriff l'arned that, he'd rub the stranger out. The stranger 'lowed he'd as soon Goroway knowed who he was. Then Jerry said as long as the stranger was subbin' fer Oklahoma, he'd better come join the Citizens' Committee. They crossed the street an' ducked back between Brokaw's

Saddlery an' Fitch's Gun Store. I didn't dast git too close an' when I got back there, the' wasn't no sign of 'em."

"Citizens' Committee!" Gannt fiddled with the heavy nugget on his watch chain, staring at nothing, his lips moving. He roused then and his eyes touched each of those who gathered about him, awaiting his judgment.

"Kin," he said, "that gang's meeting now. If you let the nits grow, they become lice that can flay a man. Take the boys out an' find the meeting place. Turn this roost upside down if need be, but *find that nest!* Once you find it, let your conscience be your guide. Plotters in the dark—that's what they are. Snakes in the weeds. Meeting in secret to overthrow the law of this town by force. Go get 'em boys. Myatt, fetch that Joiner girl here. We must know who that man is."

Goroway was pulling on his coat. He didn't look happy as he gave the order. He led a dozen or more gun warriors to the street. And Verge Myatt, who followed behind like a lone wolf, seemed discontented with the prospect of dragging an unwilling, high-spirited girl into the Lacey Pulliam Saloon.

"Foolin' with wimmen brings nothin' but trouble," he muttered.

THE meeting place of the embryo Citizens' Committee was a secret. Having taken Bret McQuaid back between buildings, Jeremiah entered a shacky lean-to where Lawyer Yates Endershot stored firewood. An innocent-looking inner door did not give out to the law office, but into a narrow space between walls.

Here, upon lifting a flat panel to which were nailed dummy cans and boxes, was revealed a narrow staircase. There was a door at the foot of the stairs and it was unbarred only to the secret knock. Beyond it was a lighted, smoke-filled subterranean room. Six men were here, supposedly to welcome a deadly killer into their ranks. They all looked him over.

One by one, Bret shook hands with these men. There was graying Ishmon Searcy, who owned the General Store and who had been victimized by Gannt. Square Lockett, the saloonman, was a stocky, edgy tempered little man who had been badly mauled by the Gannt faction. Cleve Densham, stableman, had been reduced to little more than a pony relay for Gannt's night riders. Abel Hussong, the blacksmith, was a powerful, inarticulate man with a strong fighting jaw. Pete Featherington was fat and jolly and in this more for the adventure than to even any account with Gannt. Last—and plainly the leader—was Endershot, the lawyer. He had been handed a substantial retainer and a commission to advise these outlaws.

"I'm glad," beamed lanky Yates Endershot, "that it's you, McQuaid. Oklahoma Lyle smacked a little too much of the thing we're fighting. Perhaps a town-taming sheriff must be a killer, but hardly that notorious. I hope that as sheriff you will—"

"Sheriff?" Bret's lips went thin. "I understood Goroway's the sheriff."

"Gannt's sheriff, that's true. We are not recognizing any act of those renegades as legal. They won control by employing illegal voters and by scaring legal voters from the polls. For awhile—a very short while I fancy—there may be two sheriffs. If we succeed, there will be only one. If we lose, none of us will care who's sheriff. Do you want it under those circumstances, McQuaid?"

When Bret hesitated, Jeremiah put in: "You've a job to do, young feller. Don't forget, it could be murder. But not if you're wearing the people's law badge. What can you lose?"

"Nothing," grinned Bret. "Pin 'er on, Endershot."

The lawyer administered the oath and pinned on the badge—the badge taken

from the dead breast of Otis Joiner. They shook his hand, each one in turn, and Bret noted that all wore arms. Carbines leaned against the wall. This was no bunch expecting someone to do its dirty work while the members occupied grandstand seats. Endershot looked at Bret.

"You're the leader, McQuaid. Whatever you say goes. Command us."

Bret had to laugh. "Knowing as little as I do about—" He cut off and silence took the room by the throat. Someone was tapping on the barred panel. The committeemen drank in the pattern of the sounds.

"Lupton!" snapped Endershot. "Let him in, somebody."

Now through the unbarred door came Horse Lupton, five years ago a wealthy cowman. He had been up in the lawyer's office, watching the street. His puckered gray eyes were bulging with secrets.

"They're currycombin' the town, lookin' fer us," he grinned. "An' to hell with search warrants. An' would you believe it—they ain't found a thing." He grinned slyly and a faint chuckle ran around. Endershot remained bleakly sober.

"Sometime we'll make a mistake," he gloomed. "And bring the lightning down on our heads singly. We were organized to combat just such infractions of the law as are going on over our heads at this minute. Do any of you boys doubt that we should be up there?"

"A little late now to ketch 'em enterin' an' searchin'," said Lupton. "They're tirin' of their fun, stragglin' back to the Pulliam Saloon."

"That's the trouble," complained the lawyer. "We're liable to let our opportunities slip away—to be too careful, too slow. You can bet Gannt won't dilly-dally if and when he gets his chance. What we need worse than anything right now is something even the most hardened will recognize as an abuse on Gannt's part. And the sooner we get it the better."

In Horse Lupton's eyes the dancing sparks of withheld secrets burst into flame. "I reckon," he drawled, "you got that abuse handy, Endershot. If you think the time is right and if you think we got strength enough."

"What do you mean, Horse?"

"Gannt's rustler chief—Verge Myatt—just went down to the Horseshoe Counter, found hisself locked out, busted down the door an' taken Amy Joiners down to that Pulliam buzzard roost. If I know Myatt, he done that on orders an' under protest. None of the rest of that renegade crew will be likin' it, except them that ain't an' never was cowpunchers. You need more abuse than that, Endershot?"

Old Jeremiah's eyes were black with hopeless rage. "God, no!"

Endershot looked at Bret, who had been silent, listening. "What do you think, McQuaid?"

"If you let this go, Endershot, you had better disband."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'm going to get her. You fellows stay out of sight but never lose touch. Cover me just in case. This is it, men." He drew out his Colt, verified the loads and tested the action. Nobody said anything.

They all were watching McQuaid, stirred by the drumming note of danger his words had loosed here, wondering what had stirred such hate in him that he would face such odds with an edgy smile on his lips. But mostly they were stirred and comforted by the radiant confidence of him.

He looked at them, one by one as if he were seeing them for the last time. They were all honest men, but first of all free men, who had suffered and died under the heel of oppression. He grinned at them in his rash way, holstered his Colt and went out of the room. They heard his boots on the steep staircase as they went for their carbines.

CHAPTER FIVE

Don't Stretch Your Luck, Drifter!

FOR one static moment, Bret paused at the doorway of Endershot's lean-to. The dewy breath of night crept over the town, bringing its chill and its fragrance from the river bottom. All was still.

But still though it was, sounds had their moment. For the third time, Kinsey Goroway came down the drafty niche between Brokaw's Saddlery and Fitch's Gun Store.

"You must uh bin mistaken about them coming down this alleyway," said Goroway. "Either that or you laid back so long they could uh quit the town."

"I've told you a thousand or a hundred times," moaned Bunions, "that they come thisaway. An' I didn't lose no time. I scooted back the other side uh Fitch's shop. They couldn't uh gone far as the alley even."

"An' you didn't hear nothin', which means they entered one of these buildings. Wouldn't be Endershot's, he's working for Gannt. A rabbit couldn't hide in Brokaw's, where we haven't looked already. That lean-to behind Endershot's now. It's too small to hold a meetin' in but it might rate a look."

Bret, black in the gloomy doorway, watched their shadows materialize. He was really less concerned with their approach than with reaching back into his memory, trying to recall how Libby had been in those sweet, free days of old. The brave, troubled face of Amy Joiner intruded, and her need was a spur.

A rod distant, Goroway halted his companion. "You wait here, Corns. There ain't a thing in that shed, but I want you as witness that I overlooked nothin'."

Bret heard Committeemen on the stairs below, whispering as Goroway's voice warned them. An echo of those whispers might have reached Goroway. Maybe he sensed Bret posted there. He froze stiffly. "Who's that?"

Bret laughed at him. "You've found it, Goroway—too late. Drop your gun or set it smoking, either way's all right." He hadn't drawn his gun, figuring the risk as something he must test to be satisfied. In his book, men who abused women, kids, dogs or horses were roaring lions when the odds favored them, cowards when even one doubt persisted.

Bret saw cowardice working now. He heard Bunions' plaintive bleat as he scooted away. Goroway, needing only to fire to remove a hated shadow, stood paralyzed. After a full, silent minute, he dropped his weapon. "Who's that?"

Bret stepped out, hands empty. "McQuaid, you woman-beater! Libby probably mentioned me. Libby—the girl you left at the goat-herd's. Remember?"

"She—she was sick," gulped Goroway. "I went for a doctor an'—"

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"And forgot to return, eh? Like you forgot *till death do us part,* after you forced her to follow you. And the wife and kids you abandoned, at Heber."

"I can explain," declared Goroway. "There's two sides to every argument."

"Yeah, you woman-killer. Two sides—truth and lies. You can't tell the truth—so why should I listen?" He tore away Goroway's badge. "Now, buzzard-bait—"

"No, McQuaid! You can't kill me. Gimme a chance to shoot it out."

"I begged for that, remember? Shoe's on the other foot now. No, a clean bullet's too good for you. I should flay you alive, but instead—" His backhand rocked Goroway, felling him. The man groveled, moaning, then sprang up, sprinting.

Bret caught him, knocked him flat. Goroway cried, begged, refused to rise. Bret jerked him up, patted him over for hideouts, spun him with brusque violence and marched him to the street.

Knowing the Committee was fanning out behind gave Bret a secure feeling. He could smile as he hit the street. There was no alarm in Pulliam's. Plainly Murly Bunions had not reported, remarkable repression for one habitually capitalizing information.

Across the street they marched, Goroway steadily enlivening as they neared the hangout of his fellows. He stepped out so briskly when they reached the far walk that Bret had to halt him. Goroway strove to break loose, crying out: "Hey, in there. I—"

Bret spun him violently, locking his head in his crooked arm muzzling him. Into the barroom hush induced by Goroway's call, Bret's voice struck scornfully. "I never pay a stool pigeon, Goroway. Anyway, these rats have been on my fugitive list, from Gannt on down. State's Evidence? That'll be up to the courts. Now you stand hitched while I go in and arrest these renegade sons. Arrest or kill them, one."

GOROWAY was battling desperately, clawing, kicking, slugging. Bret smashed a fist to his jaw, got him in hand and propelled him through the swing doors, head first. Bret sidestepped from the doorway as guns blasted a swift, harsh echo. Bullets gnashed at the door louvers and Goroway pitched down with a scream, sliding until Bret could see only his boots. Somebody at the bar was yelling: "Hey, it's Kin, not the slim jasper."

And the cynical rejoinder: "Is that bad? The Judas was sellin' us to the law to save his own yella hide."

A door opened in there and Gannt's scorn filled the barroom. "You pitiful damned fools! McQuaid's jobbed Goroway and you. He's out yonder."

They came swiftly, spurred less by enthusiasm than by Gannt's contempt. Bret, smiling frostily, backed to the saloon corner and off the walk. At the rear, he tried the door, found it locked and kicked out a window pane.

Stepping into a dark, stuffy card room, he groped for the inner door, let himself into a dimly lighted hallway. To his left was a drape screening the barroom. Of the doors on his right, giving out on the corridor, only one showed light beneath. Bret paused to listen. Hearing nothing, expecting anything, he shouldered in.

Amy Joiner, half crushed, half sullen, rose from a chair. "McQuaid!"

A tall, handsomely formed woman standing over her, shoved her down. "Sit still, you minx. You're going no place till you keep your end of the bargain."

Bret saw marks of a palm on Amy's cheeks as she raged. "Bargain! I've told them they could have the Horseshoe. But no, the swill hogs want my signed receipt for value received, on a silver platter. Coyotes!"

The tall, voluptuous woman laughed. Her confidence, like Gannt's was arrogantly worn. Some team, thought Bret.

"She's hysterical, mister. Don't listen to her. She takes our thousand dollars, figuring to duck without quit-claiming. She'll sign or I'll beat hell out of her."

"Get back!" Bret slid toward her. "Teaching your kind they can't push people around comes pretty high, lady. Let her alone."

"Listen to him!" the tall woman snorted, jerking Amy up with man-like strength. "She's mine, mister, till she signs. I paid for the Horseshoe and I'm no soft touch."

"Lies!" cried Amy. "I haven't seen a penny—and I won't."

"Take your hands off the girl!" Bret closed in.

The woman sneered. "Try to make me, mister. I've lived in the middle of fury too long to be bluffed by a horse-stinking cowpuncher. Do your do!"

"Sure, lady." Bret wrenched her loose and had a scalded cat on his hands. She whipped out a small pistol and Bret, who worshipped good womanhood, felt no qualm as he chopped with the heel of his hand, numbing her arm. The gun fell. She screamed a curse and struck at him. Bret rushed her to the wall, fending off her kicks. She spat on him, refusing to quiet till Amy dropped the warning.

"Sounds like Gannt coming back, McQuaid."

The tall woman listened, then screeched: "Keep out, Hav. McQuaid's here!"

Bootsteps paused in the hall, then sped past the door and out the rear. Bret wheeled, noting Amy had the tall woman's gun, and darted to the door. As he flung it open, a bullet smacked the jamb, missing him by inches, showering him with splinters. Calmly, Bret said: "Lock up, Amy. Stay here. Shoot her if she tries to get to you."

He slammed the door, glided after Gannt. The night was a bedlam of shouts and screamed curses, as renegades issued from Pulliam's against Citizen's Committee gunfire. Staccatto six-shooter fire. . . . deep rolling thunder of .45-70's . . . death brushing Empire City with rowdy bursts of sound . . . Gannt's boot echoes sheering through the racket, luring Bret back to the alley.

To his left, against a far glow, he could see Gannt swaying as he ran. Bret lit out after him. Gannt was fast. Now he heaved from Bret's sight, turning left into a side street. Almost instantly he reappeared, pounding away from embattled Fort Street. Then Bret saw the pursuing figure cross the alley, heard the call.

"Stand an' surrender, Gannt. If you don't, you're a gone gosling."

Jeremiah, thought Bret. The salty old fool's streching his luck. Bret took needed breath to yell: "Wait, Jerry! Don't close with that rattler!" No answer came back and Bret speeded up, reaching the street and wrenched hard to the right. He had a fleeting glimpse of Jeremiah waving a pistol, leaping toward the crimson light of the Corinne Parlor.

Bret yelled another warning, heard Jeremiah slog across the porch and slam the door. A gun sent solid reverberations through the Parlor wall, waking Old Jerry's agonized cry.

"McQuaid! For God's sake, hurry! He's got—"

The choking scream squeezed from Bret all qualms, all agony of his hard, swift effort. To him the answer was plain. Gannt, pausing inside the Parlor door, had murdered Jeremiah and was again in flight.

The advantage now was all Gannt's. Was he lurking behind the entrance to kill again? Would he fort up in one of the rooms? Was he even now racing out the rear? Bret was sprinting toward the back door when another faint cry from Jeremiah sent him bounding across the porch and through the half-open front doorway.

CHAPTER SIX

Up and at 'Em, Boss-Man!

TWO strides into that dim entry hall brought Bret to an abrupt halt. Then he knew he had played into Gannt's hands. The Empire City boss stood with his back against the wall, his left hand holding Jeremiah's arm in a painful hammerlock, his right pointing a cocked pistol at Bret's belly. The maw of that muzzle was like a tunnel. Behind it, the malevolent eyes of the renegade chieftain gleamed.

"The old man," he jeered, "is juicy, made-to-order bait. And you came for it like a starved bear. Look." He lifted the pressure on Jeremiah's arm. The old timer groaned; his eyes rolled and great drops of sweat beaded his seamed face. "One more lift and I bust his arm, McQuaid. Then it's your neck. Who are you, a ranger? Why did you have to point yourself at me?"

Bret said: "You're a doubting man, Gannt." His mind was less upon his answer than upon his thin, desperate hope of survival. He saw cruelty spread like a flame over the man's face. He saw what was in his thoughts, saw the reddening stare and the savagery pulsing at his thick throat. He caught Jeremiah's eyes on him and they were full of pain. Bret could see no evidence that the old timer had stopped one of Gannt's bullets. In that look was not a plea for succor but rather a sudden and desperate determination.

"Here's the chance, McQuaid!" he gritted, and twisted violently to break the hold. The pain defeated him and Gannt laughed, lifting the arm up behind his head, stretching the aging muscles, putting the brittle bones under terrible strain.

Bret saw Jeremiah's eyes go blank. He saw an awful anger send the old man into another, more desperate try. Bret distinctly heard the bone let go with an ominous crack. Gannt's hammerlock, nullified by the broken bone, was powerless now to hold Jeremiah in check.

A hoarse croak spilled from the old timer's chest as he whipped around, flung his free left arm over Gannt's right, clamped the gun beneath his arm pit and used his weight to depress Gannt's aim. "Here's the chance, McQuaid," he shouted again and it was almost a scream.

Gannt's torso was revealed now—a broad target. Cool, unhurried, Bret drew his Colt and slammed a bullet home. It struck Gannt above the sternum, stiffening him, flooding his brutal face with shock and vast surprise. He swayed and was pulled down by the sagging unconscious Jeremiah. But, stricken though he was, Gannt was not done.

Cursing streams of oaths, Gannt heaved himself clear of Jeremiah, came to his knees, lifting his gun and sighting with cool deliberation. Bret's leveled gun flamed again, the bullet breaking Gannt's gun arm.

Like a catapult, Gannt came off the floor, his eyes crazed, dazed, his lips furled and showing a froth of foam. Bret swung the muzzle of his piece into the man's face. It cut to the bone and drove him to the floor. Still raging, he came up again, hurling himself at Bret with an awful savagery. Bret struck again, putting Gannt on the floor, only to have him rise and attack once more. All Bret's careful discipline evaporated.

"You loco-eating fool!" he rapped. "You don't know when you've got enough." He shot Gannt through the head, watched him writhe slowly down, curl up and lie still. "You were so sure of yourself, so sure of me. It's the way you wanted it. Now lie there and die."

BRET reloaded, listening to riders racing along the street, heading out. He laid his gun against the door, waiting. He heard them talking. He heard them gallop past. Then he was calm and quiet again.

He holstered his gun, looked at Jeremiah.

He shouldered the old timer, carried him outside. Shooting had ceased. Empire City was so quiet Bret's bootsteps were startlingly loud on the walk. At Fort Street knots of townsmen clustered about the fallen shapes of men. Bret strode to the town medico, laboring over groaning Luscio Martinez—a border outlaw. Luscio, with a rifle ball through the chest, was a goner. Bret said so. "You're wasting your time, Doc. Let that carrion lie and give Jerry here some attention. If Empire City is ever going to honor a hero, it's going to be this old man."

The medico looked up, his lips tight, his eyes reflecting deep irritation. "A doctor," he snapped, "doesn't care whether it's a saint or a sinner he attends. Your friend will have to wait his turn."

"If that's a doctor's rule," said Bret icily, "it's high time somebody wrote a new one. Get up! Lead the way to your office!"

"No!" The doctor shook with fury. "You'll not live to see me attend Jeremiah. It's a mattter of principle with me. Take him elsewhere."

"Maybe I won't live to see it, Doc, but if not you'll not live to forget the horsewhipping I give you."

Someone called Yates Endershot. "You better listen to this man, Butler," he told the medico. "He has delivered us. Boys," he called to a group of volunteer firemen, colorfully arrayed in their company uniforms; "carry Martinez into the barn and lay him on the hay. That's too good for him. Two of you take Jeremiah from McQuaid—careful now. Take him to Doc Butler's office. Get along after them, Doc, and don't spare anything you've got to pull Old Jerry out of it."

His air of command discouraged resistance. Two husky men were packing Jeremiah away, the doctor following with low grumblings of displeasure. Endershot stared after him, laughing softly.

"Doc's all right, McQuaid. They woke him out of a sleep and dragged him out here without a drink. A mistake. Nothing wrong with Butler that a few good stiff whiskeys won't fix. Now, about you."

Bret said: "Later, Endershot. I left Amy Joiner locked in with a—"

"The fire boys broke in on that, McQuaid." The lawyer chuckled, sighing as he let long-strained nerves relax. "Amy

WHEN BIG MUDDY RAN RED!

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held her prisoner under the gun and was telling her off in a way to make a book-throwing judge envious. Right now, Madame Corinne and her girls are loading their plunder onto a manure wagon. In an hour they'll he rolling toward the railroad."

He jabbed Bret slyly. "I think she's down contemplating the ruined door of her Horseshoe." His long face went sober. "Maybe planning like the rest of us how she can pick up the frayed ends of her life and tie them off into a solid, worthwhile pattern."

Bret said: "It's toughest on the women, Endershot. And tougher yet on a lone girl. Maybe I can give her a hand."

"Luck, McQuaid," said the lawyer and watched him go, feeling suddenly very old and very lonely. A thought struck him and he called: "Oh, McQuaid! You might tell her you're still our sheriff and ask her if *she* sees any reason why you should not stay on and continue to serve. Let me know what she thinks."

THE saloon clock was tolling nine. In one hour, thought Bret, I've lived a dozen years. After a few brief, harsh echoes, strong, cruel, wicked men lay dead. A dictatorship had come and gone; another would have to be built up.

It was an endless pattern that never changed. Old Jerry had given way to Gannt. Gannt had fallen before the uprise of Endershot. The lawyer would grow strong and rich, greedy and cruel, unless some other strong man was around to counter him, keep him within bounds. Bret thought about that job, and found it much more interesting than he would have believed an hour ago.

Amy sat in the doorway of her darkened counter. holding her head with her hands, staring out through a night noisy with frogs and crickets. She heard him coming, looked along the walk and came to her feet, bracing against the jamb. "McQuaid!"

"Amy," he said, and took her hands. "Don't worry about the place. I'll help you fix up."

"I wouldn't want to detain you, McQuaid. You came to do a job. I understand you completed it satisfactorily. Now I suppose you'll return where you came from."

"I paid off a debt," he said, "but it gave me none of the anticipated pleasure. But now that the smoke's settled, I find myself happy here."

"I understand they've made you sheriff. Congratulations."

"It's not that, not entirely. Because of your father, Amy, you will be very critical of whoever wears the badge in Empire City. Would there be any use for me to try to please you? You think there's any chance I could be a credit to the example he set here?"

She was mightily pleased. The fingers he held tightened against his own. "Yes," she whispered. "I believe you can fill dad's shoes, and that would please me. I—I'd like to have you try."

They were both laughing softly then. The lights of the town were coming on again, and in their illumination he saw the keen eagerness of her lovely face, the shine of unshed tears in her eyes. He drew her into his arms. And when he felt the hunger of her lips, flame cut through him and he was caught up in it.

A red moon peeked over the eastern horizon. The desert was a wasteland of light and shadow, stretching away from the town. A breath of wind billowed the girl's hair. She roused, tore herself away. "Goodness," she gasped. "Those dishes! I wasn't half finished when—would you like to help me, Bret?"

"Sure, would," he said. "Funny thing—I always used to hate doing dishes." They laughed and walked inside.

THE END

PLANT YOUR OWN CORPSES!

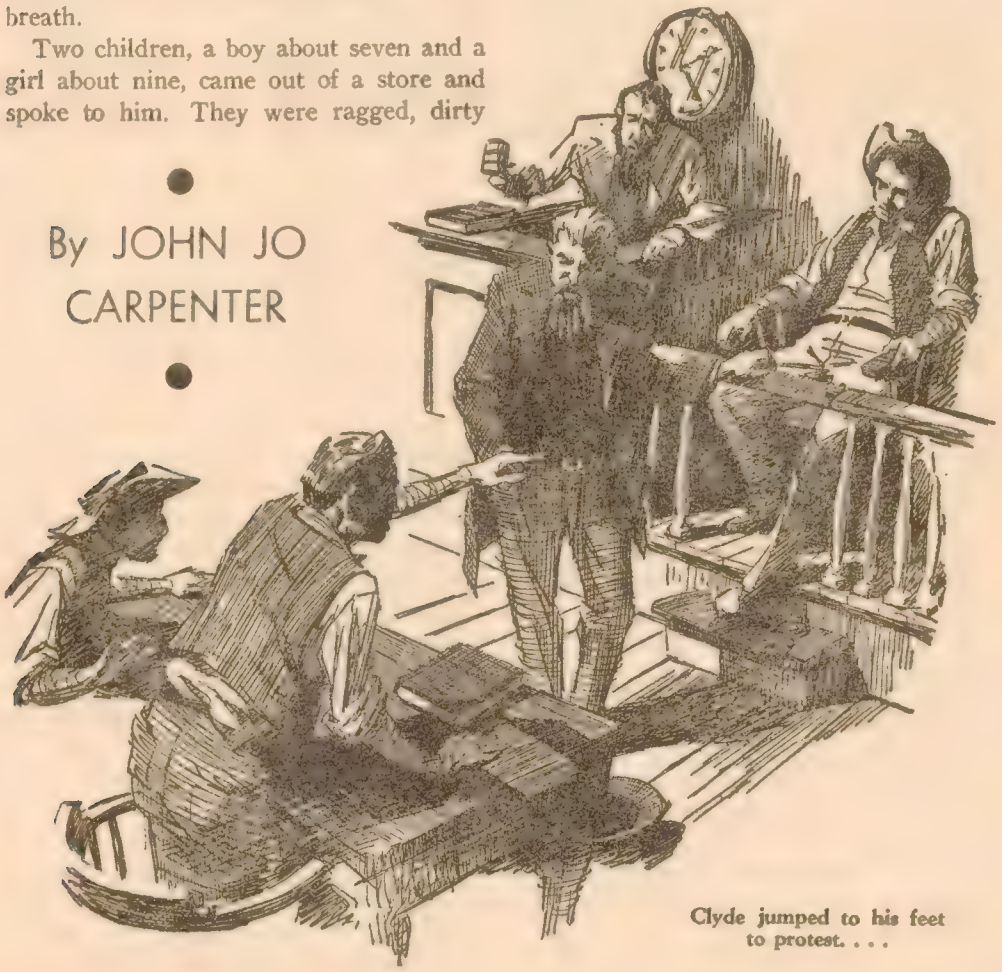
Was it yellow, quivering fear that made Jack Severn defy the frontier code, when he ignored the chance to kill his pardner's murderer—or was it a strange, shining courage that was so big and so deep that it dwarfed the code itself?

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

THE bartender said, "Jack, your dad's got his heart set on it, and they're going to be pretty mad down at the courthouse, but I won't say no more. Know how you feel." Jack nodded, refusing a second drink, and went out into the street.

His father was sitting in the shining black top-buggy, the dashboard of which bore a Lazy J Bar—the Severn brand. Their eyes met, and Jack swore under his breath.

Two children, a boy about seven and a girl about nine, came out of a store and spoke to him. They were ragged, dirty



Clyde jumped to his feet to protest. . . .

and thin—just a couple of nester's kids.

"Would you kindly like to buy some salve, mister? Only five cents, and good for man or beast, please?"

He shook his head. "No!" Their faces did not fall; they seemed to be used to such rebuffs. They started to turn away. He saw that the round carton of salve—two dozen round tins—had been reduced by only one sale. A Severn could not let anyone, even a nester, walk away sad for the lack of a coin. Particularly a nester. He called them back.

"Mebbe I can use some salve. Take two. Keep the change."

He handed them each a quarter, took the salve, and went to the buggy. He handed his father one tin, and dropped the other in his shirt pocket. He untied the team, climbed in the buggy, and dropped down wordlessly. His father was studying the guarantee on the salve. Old J. J. Severn had failed badly since his stroke a year ago, but he still carried the skeleton of a lot of man. He slid the salve under the black laprobe.

"Winters' kids. You remember Phil Winters, that worked for Ed and then squatted down at the south branch of the crick? Phil's on the jury. Probably be the most cash he's handled since he went to farming for himself."

As he backed the buggy out, Jack felt his father's steady stare. "Well, what's it to be, Jack?"

"Let's go home, Dad," Jack said wearily. "You didn't think I was going down there to that trial, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

The team started smoothly on the nine-mile trip back to the Lazy J Bar. Old J. J. rolled a cigarette and had Jack light it for him. They passed the courthouse, and neither looked at it. A block farther, the old man caught hold of both lines. The team stopped.

"Whoa. This will take a minute or two, Jack. Let me try it once more. Then, whatever you decide, I'm for it. Old men can't explain why they think the way they do, any more than young ones. I won't try. I'll just say that the house I built out there in the grove is the oldest one in sixty-five miles.

"I'm here forty-two years, come Christmas. It was a hell of a country when I came here. Another fellow and I, we ran the first United States marshal out of here because we didn't want any law. I went through two wars—one against the Rogers outfit, one against the damned sheep people. Won 'em both, without the help of the law.

"Jack, that was yesterday. Don't matter much whether you care for the law or not. It's here. It's bigger than you are—and it should be, even if you are a Severn. I brought the law here. I was our first sheriff—an illegal one for eight years, legal for two.

"I kind of hoped Ed would study law. When he taken to cattle, I hoped it would be you. One thing is about the same as the other in the way of jobs, but I would kind of like to see it proved that the Severns can take their place in the country we got today, just as I could in the old days."

Jack did not answer. His father finished his cigarette. Their eyes met again, and for some reason, Jack remembered a terrible hiding he had received from the old man's hands. Thirty-six licks with the end of a two-ply tug; he was black and blue for three days, but he never ran another horse uphill. Remembering his dad's swift, harsh justice did not stir him to anger and bitterness as it once had. Instead, it suddenly melted him with pity that his father should have come to this.

He handed the lines over and dropped down to the street.

"All right. You win. You can get home by yourself. I'll send for what things I want."

"You—you ain't comin' back?"

Jack shook his head and turned and hur-

ried back to the courthouse. A deputy sheriff was standing in the doorway. He sighed with obvious relief at the sight of Jack, and made way. Jack swung past him and the other loafers who lined the hall. The sheriff, Cy Hurd, was waiting at the courtroom door. The relief on his face was almost comical.

"That's the boy! Hold up a minute, Jack." He reached for the silver buckle on Jack's gun belt. "I'll take these. Cain't wear 'em into a courtroom, you know. Lordie, but I'm glad you didn't make me come after you, boy."

JACK surrendered the gun and pushed the sheriff away with impatience, amused and peeved at the thought of the windy, wordy old codger, who owed his political life to the Lazy J Bar, "coming after" him.

The clock over Judge Seneca Eckert's bushy, unkempt head said two ten. He clumped down the aisle between the packed benches and removed his big hat as he stepped inside the railing. Caleb Masterson, the county attorney, a short, bony, humpbacked man with a homely, honest, stubborn face, motioned to him curtly.

"You're just in time." He turned to the bench. "Your honor, I'll call Jack Severn. Be sworn, Jack."

Jack strode to the witness stand and lifted his hand for the oath. Then he stood there a moment, deliberately looking over the packed courtroom, letting them look at him, daring them to whisper. It was not the conviction that he was *right* that made it possible for him to do this, but the fact that he was a Severn.

There sat the nester jury—twelve dirt farmers. No cattleman could be found who would take sides between the Braseas and the Severns. The jurymen were terrified. They would not take sides. They would shrink from their duty, but they would do it as they saw it, rather than incur the burden of having to explain anything else.

The "squatters' truce," which set up Checkerboard Creek as the line beyond which plows could not go, was less than three years old. Not a cattleman there but felt galled at being tried by nesters. Not a nester who did not feel the insecure peace slipping, not one who relished the job, not one who did not wish the cattlemen could settle their own troubles.

There sat old Major Wynn McRay, former Union cavalryman, pioneer Territorial legislator, a silver-haired, tobacco-chewing, profane lawyer as well-known in Washington as here. At seventy-four he was still going strong; he would defend many another man after Clyde Brasea.

There sat Clyde, short, dark, burly, a man as strong and as intemperate as a bull. Beside him sat his brother, Lint, also short, dark and burly, but a thinker.

The late Lint Brasea, their father, had come to the Territory shortly after J. J. Severn, settling twenty-eight miles away in a land where there were tens of thousands of acres of range more than could be needed. Old Lint had always managed to get along with the Severns somehow. The Lint boys had handed the Lazy J Bar its first setback.

The Severns had elected to take on the nesters in behalf of the cattlemen and the Braseas in behalf of the Severns, all at the same time. The Braseas had won two-thirds of the contested range in the same settlement that was now known as the "squatters' truce."

Jack sat down, and Caleb led him through the routine identification questions, while Major McRay dozed and drooled tobacco. Two more deputies, one carrying a shotgun, sifted into the room and took their places at the rear as Caleb got briskly down to cases.

"Where were you on the night of April tenth?"

"At the dry wash where the Silliman trail swings west to Checkerboard creek. I had a purebred bull down there. Been

gored. I was trying to treat him. I had a rope on—"

"Just a minute. Did you observe anyone else there at that time?"

Jack looked at the Major, expecting an explosion. The old man dozed on. Jack said, "Yes," and let it go at that, until Caleb prompted him.

"Who?"

"Francis Thornton." Again he waited to be asked another question, peeved that Caleb had interrupted him. This time the judge said harshly, "Go on, if there was anyone else."

Jack looked up at him and said, "There was. Clyde Brasea."

"Tell us what happened," Caleb said.

Speaking slowly, so as not to be startled and made to look foolish if Major McRay interrupted, Jack told them.

"As I started to say, I had a rope on this bull and was trying to tie him so I could treat him, when I see Francis cross the creek onto what the Braseas claim is Brasea range. Now I wondered then what he was doing there, but I had my hands full of feverish bull.

"Then Francis disappears, and in a minute I see him come back driving a cow and a calf ahead of him. He is going to push them back toward our range. It's a white-face calf, and it belongs to one of our bulls."

"Just a minute." Caleb turned to the Major with a bow. "Counsel will want the cow identified. Can you state whose brand was on it?"

"At the time I couldn't see. Later, I see it's a Big B, Little B—Brasea's. Anyway, Francis rides out of sight pushing the cow and calf. I yell for him to help me with the bull, but he didn't hear me.

"THE next thing I see is Clyde Brasea, riding hell-for-leather across the creek after Francis. I turn the bull loose and start after him. Clyde don't see me. Francis, he seen Clyde and turned around. It looked to me like he was going to wait, for a minute. Then he sees Clyde is carrying a gun, and he changes his mind. He starts to head for my place as fast as his horse can go.

"Then Clyde catches up with him and swings at him with his fist and knocks him out of the saddle and the horse steps on him. Clyde pulls up and gets off and runs back. Francis tries to get up but he can't make it, so he pulls his gun. Clyde pulls his and they both shoot—only Clyde shoots first and kills Francis."

"How far away were you?"

"About a hundred rods, maybe not that much. I could show you."

"You distinctly saw Clyde shoot first? I mean, you're certain his was the first shot?"

Jack grinned and said, "Caleb, if I wasn't dead-moral-certain, I wouldn't say so. Francis shot himself in the leg. That's how near he come to getting his gun out for the first shot. That horse stepped right in the small of his back. Francis never would have been good for a lick of work anyway."

Caleb scratched his chin, deliberately killing time, letting this sink in. Jack sent his eyes around the room once more, staring them down, letting them see how a Severn took it. He knew what they thought of him. He was past the point of caring. No Severn ever worried too much about what people thought.

"That's all," Caleb said suddenly. "Your witness, Counsel."

Major McRay sat up and yawned and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He pushed his white mane back and gave Jack a cold smile. Less than a month ago, the Major had come over to the Lazy J Bar to get old J. J. drunk in his wheel chair. He almost succeeded; it had been a rollicking visit, and it did the old cripple a lot of good.

"I suppose you've heard guns go off before," the Major said, with soft sarcasm.

"Yes."

"So we can take your word you didn't get rattled at the shooting."

"Yes, you can."

"The Severns have fired a few guns themselves, eh?"

"The Severns have."

The Major bit off a fresh chew of tobacco. "Francis Thonton was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Pretty good friend?"

"My best."

"For quite a while?"

"Quite a while."

"Mebbe you can say how long?"

"A little more than six years."

"Ah! And how do you date that, Mr. Severn?"

Jack turned on his grin and said, "I believe it is a matter of public record in the State of Nebraska, Major. Francis and I stood trial in Scottsbluff for assault and battery."

"You met in jail, in other words?"

"Yes."

"While you were back there with part of the vast Severn fortune, buying fine-grade whiteface heifers to add to the huge Severn herds?"

"That's right, Major."

The Major yawned as though, having made his point, he now regarded it as worthless. One of the nesters in the jury box cleared his throat nervously. Jack looked at him. The man's thin, meager face was familiar. That would be Phil Winters, who once had worked for Jack's elder brother, Ed.

Something grated across Jack's raw nerves. He remembered the man as one of the many, shadowy Severn hands as he saw him sitting in judgment there on cattlemen. He itched all over, and twisted angrily in his seat, aware that his face was red.

"Now let's go back to this shooting again," the Major began. "I believe you identified the cow as belonging to the Brasea outfit?"

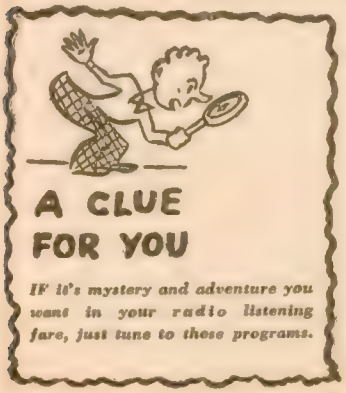
"Yes, after Clyde high-tailed it for home." Jack met Clyde's eyes deliberately then, and Clyde jumped to his feet to protest the insinuation that he had run away. The Major twitched his arm and the judge banged his gavel and Clyde sat down. "I made out the Big B, Little B brand, all right," Jack went on.

"You regarded the calf as your own?"

"The calf—and plenty of calves like him—is something that's got to be threshed out one of these days. We're not buying high-priced bulls to improve other people's scrubs."

"What did you do with the cow and calf?—disregarding your high-priced Severn bulls for the moment."

"I chased them three-four miles back into my range. I put Francis's body on his horse, and drove them back until I figured



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they'd stay. That night I sent two of the boys out to bring them in. I've got them home now."

"Are you acquainted with Earl Mapes?"

"Yes."

"I'll ask if you recognize this."

CALEB started to object, but Jack caught his eye and the prosecutor changed his mind. The Major got to his feet and shuffled over and handed Jack a piece of paper, torn from a child's school tablet. Jack took it negligently.

"Sure I recognize it."

The Major looked at the Judge and said, "Defendant's One for identification. I would have put a witness on the stand to link it up, but I believe this witness already has.

The judge nodded. The old Major got rid of an accumulation of tobacco juice.

"Do you know who wrote it?"

"I wrote it."

"Then what did you do with it?"

"I gave it to Earl Mapes, and asked him to drop it off at the Brasea place. I heard Earl was going over there. This was a day or two after Francis was killed. I heard Clyde might migrate to California."

Again Cylde leaped to his feet, stung. This time, at a glance from the judge, he sat down, muttering to his brother.

"Will you please read that letter to the jury?"

"I don't mind," Clyde said. He read the note aloud: "Clyde, I've got a cow and a calf over here, the cow with your brand. If you're as big a skunk as I think you are, go surrender to the sheriff. If you're half a man, meet me in town Wednesday. If you don't, I'm going to tell it around that you were scared to come get a cow that had your brand on it. We don't need any law to settle this."

The entire jury stirred as Jack folded the note and handed it up to the judge. The Major nodded.

"And did he meet you in town, under the terms of your dare?"

"He did not!" Lint had to hold Clyde down this time. Jack went on reluctantly, "A dirty, double-dealing bootlick by the name of Earl Mapes showed the letter to my father before he took it over to the Brasea place. Behind my back, my brother went into town and made them issue a warrant to arrest Clyde."

"What did you intend to do, had Clyde met you in town?"

Jack waited a minute and said, laconically, "Kill him."

"Why?"

"He killed my buddy."

"And that's all the reason you need?"

"That's all the reason that was ever needed around here."

"By a Severn, you mean."

"By anybody that called himself a man."

"Oh!" The Major smiled delightedly. "And so, being a man, you served notice that you would kill Clyde before the law could bring him to trial, is that it?"

"That's about it."

"Were you asked to testify in this trial? I mean at the time of Clyde's arrest—on that Wednesday?"

"Sure. Caleb said he'd need my testimony."

"And you told him—?"

"Nothing doing."

"Oh! You refused to testify against him, eh? Why?"

"I've told you," Jack said irritably, aware of a growing nervousness, "that I do things my own way."

"Did the County Attorney subpoena you?"

"He did *not*. I hear he tried. I've spent the last month and a half where I'd be pretty hard to serve with papers."

"Let's get this straight." The Major's voice was as silky as ever. "You refused to testify, because you had your own code. You took to the hills to dodge a summons. But you're here testifying."

"I guess I am."

"Have you changed your mind about killing Clyde?"

Jack met Clyde's eyes. "I guess I have."

"That's all."

The old soldier-legislator-lawyer went back to his seat and dropped down. Caleb Masterson, aware somehow that something had gone wrong without quite knowing what it was, shook his head.

"No further questions."

"The witness is excused," the judge said.

JACK stepped down and walked toward the gate in the railing, stopping only to pick up his hat. The two Braseas stared straight ahead as he passed them. He could smell Lint's sweat—Lint had been doing two men's work with his brother in jail—and the violet pomade of Clyde's brand-new jail haircut.

Then the defendant turned around, scraping his chair so that the jurymen jumped again, and Jack met his eyes. There was burning shame in them—and not just because he was being tried by nesters, either, although he felt as keenly about that as Jack. Part of his shame came from having missed that Wednesday meeting with Jack, for the Braseas and the Severns had the same code.

But there was still another reason, and Jack understood now that Clyde bitterly regretted Francis Thornton's death, and had not intended to kill him. How many times can you swing from one running horse and, with your fist, knock a man off another running horse? How many times will the horse step on him, crippling him?

Jack knew then that Clyde had not realized Francis's back was smashed. Clyde had only seen him tugging at his gun. His temper was notorious—and he had seen his brand on a cow being driven toward the Severn place. He had shot back.

"My way would have been best after all, Clyde," Jack said.

Clyde could only nod, but Lint, the quieter one, spoke up. "I guess maybe you're right, Severn, but I guess you better keep your mouth shut after today."

Both Braseas turned their backs. Jack shrugged. He could understand Clyde's side of it—how he could regret Francis's death without feeling guilt; but neither of the Braseas could ever understand why Jack had reversed himself and testified.

At the moment, Jack could not understand it himself. He stalked through the gate and down the aisle, and he knew that from this moment on, people would think differently about the Severns.

The sheriff beckoned to him from his office. Jack went in, and the sheriff handed him back his gun.

"You did just right, Jack. Gad, we've got to have law and order. Of course, since you made your brag—"

"Ah, shut, up, Cy," Jack said.

The sheriff was still too pleased with Jack to understand his raw-nerved mood. He insisted on helping buckle on the gun.

"They won't take long now. They'll finish her up in a few minutes now. Clyde will draw a good, sitff sentence. They won't hang him, because after all Francis did have his cow, and he did draw first. But Clyde will get what's coming to him."

"No he won't."

Jack could hear Clyde's voice now. Caleb, counting on Jack's eyewitness testimony, had rested, and the Major was putting on only one witness—the defendant himself. He could not make out Clyde's words, but he was answering with a matter-of-fact terseness that admitted everything, denied nothing. He was telling the same story Jack had told.

"No he won't," Jack said somberly, patting the gun-belt snugly into place around his hips. "Either Clyde's right and I'm wrong, or I'm right and Clyde's wrong. Those nesters have got to pick between two men telling the same story. I made my brag, like you said, and backed down

on it A man shouldn't do that, and they know it. Point one in Clyde's favor. Do you see what I mean?

"Point two is something I never realized until now. The nesters are the balance of power in this county. Few as they are, they're strong enough to serve notice on the old-timers. They're going to play it safe today, the first time they use that power. They'll turn Clyde loose."

"No."

"You mark my words, they'll turn him loose." He went out into the hall, and his conviction deepened as he heard the Major's crisp, "That's all, Clyde!"

The sheriff followed him, mouth agape. "When a man passes his word, he ought to live up to it, don't you think? Maybe I'll still have my chance."

The sheriff trotted after him, caught him at the door. "By golly, I'll bet you're right! Jack, you wouldn't—?"

"This time," Jack said, "it will be a clear case of self-defense. He owes me a meeting. I don't see how he can pass it up. Maybe the nesters will have to pick sides after all."

"Jack," the sheriff wailed, "give me that gun."

JACK pulled away and went down the courthouse steps. Two riders that he knew slightly were sitting on the bottom step, waiting for their boss to come out. They looked at him oddly as he passed, and they did not speak. Neither did he. He could feel their eyes boring into his back as he returned to the saloon.

The bartender, more uneasy than ever, had the good sense not to say anything. Jack had a drink and then slouched at the bar, reading a month-old newspaper. In a little while, Caleb Masterson shuffled in with his crab-like gait. He ordered a drink.

"Went to the jury. Something's gone wrong. Cy Hurd tells me you bet on acquittal." Jack nodded silently, and Caleb went on. "You could be right. You seem to dope out things pretty well. I can't understand how it could be, though."

He finished his drink, not quite daring to ask Jack why he expected an acquittal. He left. A man came in and said the jury was locked up. The saloon remained empty. Men started in, saw Jack, and went on down the street to another place. The bartender lost trade but did not complain.

Major Wynn McRay came in, and he and Jack exchanged nods. The Major bought a whiskey and water and sipped it slowly. Two loafers drew closer, caught Jack's eye, and went out abruptly, leaving only Jack, the Major, and the barkeep.

"Your dad always wanted one of you boys to study law," the Major said. "He picked Ed, a mistake. You've got the mind for it, boy. Why don't you stay in town a while and read the books with me, see how you like it?"

"Guess not, thanks."

"You'd make a tip-top trial lawyer, Jack. I saw you reading that jury like a book. Law's a great place to watch things from, and you reach out and pick something up now and then, too. I'll fire the fool that's in with me now if you'll say the word."

It was a foolish gesture, one that only an old-timer like the Major could see and not think theatrical. Jack patted his gun.

"Here's my law, old-timer."

"Oh, the hell with you then," the Major snapped.

Someone ran past the saloon. Jack got only a glance of a boy about fourteen. He was barefoot—that was why they had not heard his heels thump. He pushed the paper away and walked toward the door.

It was a trial day, and small boys were all down at the courthouse—unless the verdict was in. Another small boy pattered past the window, sprinting to carry the word, and then another. The Major gulped the last of his whiskey and water,

cursing. He turned to Jack with a frown.

"Only allowed one drink a day. Damn it, I saved this one so I could sip it and enjoy it. Jack, where are you going?"

Jack let the doors swing back in the old man's face. The Major did not follow him to the street. The old man had seen too much in his time to do that. He went back and ordered another whiskey and water, and Jack could hear him cursing all the Severns that were ever born.

"The old man could have been Governor. But no, he's got a private sheep-war on."

The crowd had boiled out of the courthouse and was in the dusty street. He was surprised that here could be so many of them. He could pick out the sheriff, and two deputies, one of them carrying his eternal shotgun. They seemed ill at ease, and they were having difficulty getting people to disperse.

He recognized the judge, and then he saw a ramshackle wagon stop, and the woman holding the lines waited patiently for her husband to be discharged from his jury duty. Word had spread fast, even to the vacant lot back of the feed store, where the nesters always tied.

Jack walked on down to the postoffice, which adjoined the building opposite from the courthouse. Lint Brasea came out of the door and went back in, having spotted Jack. The sheriff followed him, and then the deputy with the shotgun. An old man with long hair and a gray beard suddenly screeched.

"Get in the clear. Gawdalmighty, you danged fools—do you want to be kilt? Woman, get that team out of the way!"

The old man vanished. The woman moved the team a few feet, but the old man's warning had no other effect. The crowd had seen the law triumph over private vengeance when Jack took the witness stand. It had hypnotized them. Five years ago they would have scattered like quail. Today they paid no attention to him. They only waited to see Clyde Brasea come out.

CLYDE came out suddenly. His hulking figure appeared in the door of the courthouse, his hands on both jambs. He had a gun around his thick middle, and his hat was back on his head, and his tight-sleeved shirt was open to give him freedom of action. His eyes darted through the crowd, across the street, and lighted on

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Jack. Jack thought he trembled a little. At least he hesitated.

But only briefly, only for the split-second it took his stubborn brain to take command of his bull's body again. He stepped forward and began walking down the steps.

It was then that the woman in the nester's wagon understood what was going on. She stood up and lashed at her rickety old team, and slowly they got into action, slowly the wheels began to roll.

He was close enough to Clyde now to see sweat on the other man's face. His temples dripped. His lower lip quivered. He knew he was Jack's superior with his fists, but that he had no chance with him in a gunfight. For one thing, the time he had spent in jail had raddled his nerves.

Clyde regretted having killed Francis, and he most certainly did not want to die. He took another slow step forward, and his huge shoulders started to go back. Jack saw his tongue dart out to wet his lips.

"You're first, Clyde. Or shall I cuss you out?"

Lint Brasea gave a strangled cry, but made no effort to come to his brother's aid. The sheriff moaned as his deputy raised the shotgun. He struck down the barrel, for the crowd's sake, and just then Clyde tilted forward on his toes, and his right elbow crooked for the draw.

Jack waited. He wanted Clyde to have his hand on the gun first. He saw the thick arm start up.

"Mister, would you like to buy some salve?"

Clyde roared as the piping voice came from behind him, startling him worse than a gunshot would have done. His hand came forward and slashed down, and the gun came out. The little girl was alone now.

Clyde shot once. Jack knew he was slow and off-balance and he did not bother to move aside. He had his own gun in his hand when the pinch-faced nester, Phil Winters, came running down the steps. He came three at a time, and he made a sound such as Jack had never heard before from a human throat.

The little girl screamed and her salve went into the dust and she ran for the rickety wagon. Jack dropped the gun back into its holster and walked across the street and caught Winters by the arm.

"Cut it out, Phil! Nobody's going to hurt your young'n."

He had to peel Winters loose from Clyde, and then he had to push him, spinning, toward the wagon.

"Get up, Clyde. This damn-foolishness has gone far enough. Come on and I'll buy you a drink."

Clyde goggled at him from a white face. "H-honest, Jack? Y-y-you could have k-k-killed me."

Jack shrugged. "And hung for it. Those plow pilgrims wouldn't let a second man off. I made my brag good—what more does a man want in this world, besides a good drink?"

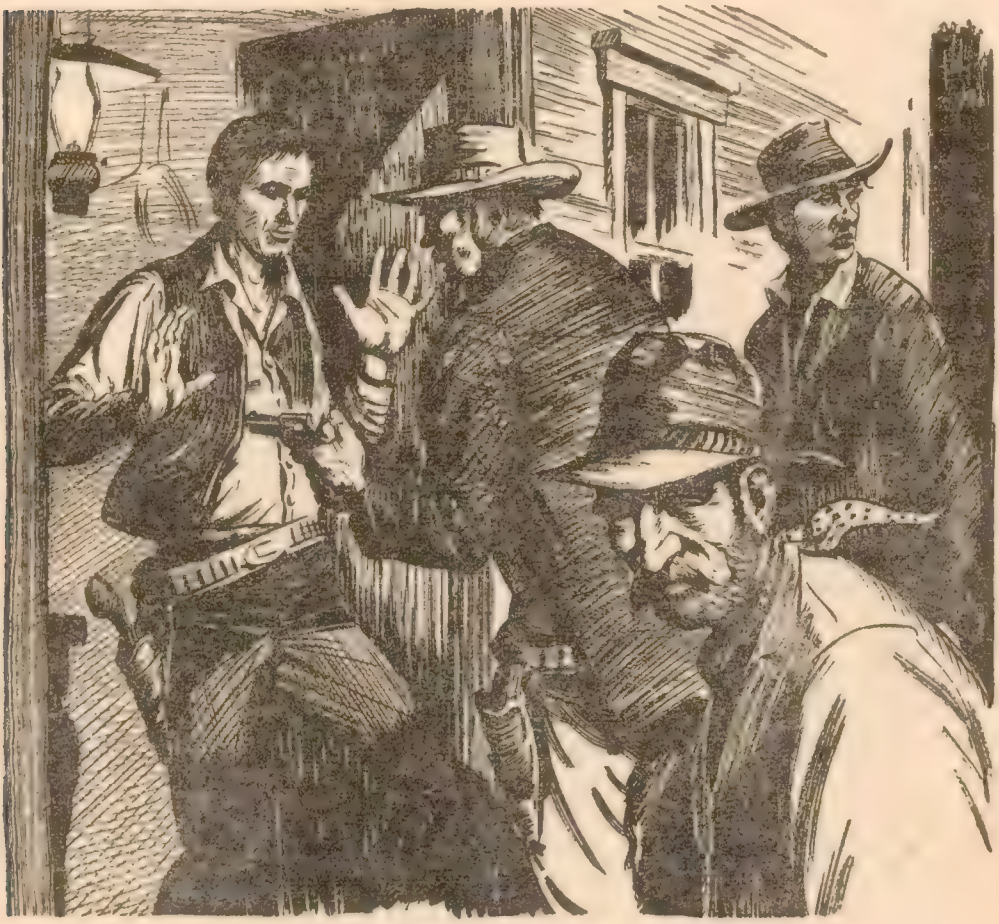
He helped Clyde to his feet, and the shadow of Francis Thornton was no longer between them. Lint joined them, and then the sheriff, and then Jack remembered the little girl and her salve. They passed the hat, and he had her hold her apron while he dumped the money into it.

"Something like forty dollars there, baby. Buy your pop another farm and tell him to stay off of juries," he said. "And I'm not waiting any longer for that drink."

Major McRay saw them coming. As they came in the door he said, "The squatters bluffed you, hey? Cattleman's day is ended, by the looks of things."

And Jack snarled at him, "Ah, shut up! I'll show you whose day is ended if you give me another chance at those law books. Everybody step up to the bar. This one's on the Braseas!"

A HELL OF A DAY FOR LAWIN'!



They were the ones, Dan McAbee knew, who had held up the bank. . . .

By ROD PATTERSON

If Dan McAbee crawfished to that league of killers who'd been his pardners along the dark and twisted trails, the yellow brand of cowardice would be etched on his hide forever. . . . But if he tried to gun them down, then the blood-red badge of murderer would be pinned to his swinging, lifeless corpse!

THE doctor's quiet-faced wife opened the dispensary door and beckoned to Dan McAbee where he sat in the half-dark waiting room. He got to his feet and stood still to get himself in hand, his blue eyes tight, his cheeks taut and hollow beneath the high cheekbones.

"You can come in for a minute before the operation," the woman said in a hushed voice. "Your father wants to speak to you."

Dan slid past her into the small white

room with its smells of disinfectant and chloroform. He walked on tiptoe, thin-lipped. Half way to the operating table he looked down at the still shape of Marshal Luke McAbee.

"Dad," he said in a voice that seemed to block up behind the lump in his throat. "Are you—how you feelin', Dad?"

The old man lay flat on the narrow white table under a clean sheet that covered him from feet to armpits. His hands were extended at his sides as stiffly as though someone had placed them there, his normally ruddy face streaked with the oily shine of sweat, his eyes closed to thin slits, his strong mouth working at the corners. There was no sound but his breathing—harsh, labored, slow.

Out in the noisy clatter and rumble of Grand City's Main Street the sun still shown, but in here, in this clean but somehow terrible little room, it was already dusk—the dusk of death.

Dan hardly breathed. He felt something twist in his stomach. His father's lips moved soundlessly. Dan bent closer, his hat crumpled into a shapeless mass in his hands. "Dad," he whispered. "I'm here, Dad."

Then he heard Luke's voice, very low and dragged-out. "They got me in the back, son. When I went in the front door they got me—"

Dan felt dry and cold inside. He licked his lips once or twice. "Never mind, Dad. Just take it easy."

"Three of 'em, son," Luke whispered. "They got away. You—got to—help—find 'em."

"Sure," Dan choked. "Sure, Dad."

"Pin on my star," the old man breathed. His eyes had opened a slit and they looked dull and blue-centered and sightless, like the eyes of a blind man. His hand moved beside him and turned palm up. There was the hard glint of a small ball-pointed star in that palm.

"Ed Heafy'll help you. Don't take no chances on them, son. Shoot—to kill!"

"Don't worry," Dan said, making it as steady as he could. "Don't worry—about anything." He took the badge and pinned it to his shirt front, under his coat. "We'll get those dirty—" He didn't finish.

Luke's eyes had closed again. His breathing went on, slow, rasping.

"I don't have to swear you in," he said so softly Dan had to bend closer to hear the words. "You'll be city marshal till the town council—"

Standing there motionless, Dan thought his father had died. But the doctor's wife spoke at his elbow. "He's unconscious. He can't hear you now. The doctor's waiting."

Nodding at her, Dan stepped back, looking down at the old man until he reached the door. Then, in the waiting room, he closed it quietly after him and put on his hat.

TWO people sat on the bench he had left a moment before—a man and a woman. He stared at them, stunned. Then the voice of Fran Heafy said, "Dan, how is he?" He watched the girl rise and come toward him.

The burly middle-aged man on the bench was Sheriff Ed Heafy, Fran's father. Dan said huskily, "He looked pretty bad. How many times did they shoot him, Ed?"

Ed Heafy cleared his throat. "Three times," he said. "They were comin' out of the bank when he came around the corner of Custer. I heard the shootin' from my office on the square. There were three of 'em. They killed Cash Mayo's teller and got twenty thousand dollars."

"They all got away?"

"For a while they did," the sheriff agreed in his rumbling voice. "I've got all my boys watchin' the roads out of town and the depot. They'll never leave alive."

"Yeah," Dan said. He wondered if Heafy thought that was going to help any.

"The doc's goin' to probe for the bullets."

Fran was close to him. He felt her strong hands gripping his arms. Vaguely he saw her face, her dark upturned eyes, the pallor of her cheeks that made her lips look so red. He tried to smile. Then she saw the badge on his shirt. "Dan, you're not—"

"Dad asked me to wear his star," he told her. "I told him I'd find those thugs and I will."

Ed Heafy spoke from the bench. "He always wanted you to be his deputy. It's a helluva way—" He broke it off, leaning forward, his hands knotted between his knees—a big man, powerfully built, with a craggy face that looked grim and savage.

Dan felt remorse stab through him. A hell of a way, was right. Luke had planned big things for him in Grand City —first a deputy marshal, later on even mayor of the town. Dan's mouth jerked; his blue eyes squeezed tight in a grimace.

"I been away from him all these years, fiddle-footin' all over the country." He took a deep breath. "Maybe this wouldn't have happened if I'd done like he wanted and stuck with him."

Fran's grip tightened on his arms. She shook her dark head, protesting, "Nothing's to be gained by blaming yourself. It just wasn't meant to be, and now —well, now you're home and Luke needs you. Forget all the rest of it, Dan." Her eyes turned dark with anxiety. "And I know he wouldn't want you to take unnecessary chances."

Dan heard her words but they didn't register. He was possessed by a kind of dumb agony which was his conscience torturing him. He was thinking of the wasted years, of all the things he could have done for his father, and how much nicer he could have been to him.

Above all he was thinking of one particular mistake he had made four years before when he'd got in with a bad bunch in another state, a time when he'd needed money desperately.

But he didn't want to remember that bad time now, didn't want to think about it. It hadn't seemed so bad then. He started hanging out in saloons, lonely, not wanting to write to his father for money. At first it had seemed fine, shouldering against a bar, drinking some—not much. It had given him a fine, hard sense of confidence in himself when times were bad and jobs were hard to get.

The bad bunch had taken him in, and he had gone with them. That was four years ago. He'd been twenty then—old enough to know better. They had drifted from town to town and one night the four men with him had killed a bartender and had robbed him. Dan had taken no actual part in the crime, but he had been seen riding with the bad bunch and the lawdogs were howling at his heels.

The bunch had split up and he hadn't

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seen any of the men since, probably never would see them again. It was all in the past, buried in his own memory and in those of the men he had ridden with. He didn't want to think about it any more. He wanted to think about his father.

It was strange why he'd never really considered what Luke McAbee had done for him through the years after Dan's mother had died. He'd taken it for granted that his father would always be around when he came to visit him. He was on one of those visits now, had been in Grand City a week. And now—this.

Ed Heafy's voice broke across Dan's agonizing thoughts. "You better go home, Dan, and get your supper. You'll be up all night and—"

"I don't want any supper," Dan said thickly. "I'll wait here till the doc gets through with—"

"Those thugs are holed up somewhere in town," Ed argued. "They won't try a getaway till late tonight prob'ly, when the saloons close up. You'll need something under your belt to keep you awake."

"I'll be awake," Dan said savagely.

"Go on, Dan." It was Fran speaking. She touched his arm, and he glanced quickly down at her troubled face. He'd forgotten she was there. "Go home, Dan. We'll let you know right away if—if anything—"

"Luke'll be all right," Ed Heafy said.

"Yeah," Dan sighed. But he saw the shadow in Ed's pale eyes and felt it reflected in his own. "Okay," he said, "I'll go home for an hour. I'll meet you here at seven."

"We've got every road watched," Ed assured him again. "They can't break through even if they manage to get horses. We'll have 'em all 'fore mornin' and they'll hang!"

DAN went out to Main Street. He didn't see much of anything that was in front of him. His mind was a welter of emotions—grief, remorse, rage. Of one thing he was sure. He was not a coward. He knew this as he knew Luke McAbee's blood ran in his veins—the same blood that had never let his father back down from anything in all the years he had been Marshal of Grand City.

He went up the plank walk, and people moved all around him, unseen and unheard, like figures in a dream, without real form or substance. He made the five-block walk through the business district in a kind of daze.

The clatter of traffic went on, and twilight was on the town, and lights in saloons and stores sprang up. He passed the hotel, the lumber yard, threaded his way through the moving wagons and horses in the street. He turned down Choctaw Lane and went up to his father's house.

That wood-frame house he had shared with his father ever since he could remember, until he had left home five years ago. He lighted oil lamps and moved through the familiar rooms for a while, restlessly. It seemed very quiet, very empty and still, with the old man's stuff scattered around—a blue wool shirt on the back of a chair, boots set at drunken angles near that, a pair of suspenders hanging from the knob of a closet door.

Luke had four or five guns in that closet—he had always liked guns and knew how to take care of them—and when Dan thought of them he opened the door and looked in. He lifted a gun belt off a hook and stared at the blue-steel revolver in the glossy leather holster. He checked the weapon's loads, then strapped the belt on, drawing the big silver buckle tight.

He went down the short dark hallway to the kitchen. The stove was still warm, a coffee pot simmering on it. He poured some in one of Luke's thick china cups and drank it black. He looked at himself in the mirror over the sink, the shaving

mirror the old man had looked into every day.

When Luke had been twenty-four he'd probably looked a great deal like Dan. In the mirror now Dan could see the old man's square short nose, the old man's firm jaw and straight mouth in his own features, the same blue eyes with the lids slightly drooping at the outside corners. But there was a difference somewhere. Dan's face was sharper, shrewder, more alert, not so square and solid and dependable.

In the past there hadn't been anything Dan couldn't talk Luke out of—playing hooky from the little block-shaped schoolhouse on Main, or riding the freights to Trinity Junction and coming home days later like a tramp. Even the beltings he'd got from Luke for these escapades had been milder than he deserved—he knew that now. Luke should have whaled hell out of him, should have beaten him within an inch of his life.

And then, years later, when he'd quit the constable's job his father had got him, Luke should have punched him silly. But he hadn't. He'd just shaken his head, had said, "A man shouldn't be made to do something he hates. Go ahead, son. You got itchy feet, and you may as well get it out of your system while you're young. I know *I* had to."

Dan stared in the mirror. "You cheap punk!" he snarled at the face that stared back at him. "You're no better than those hoodlums that shot him in the back!"

Dan wheeled around and went back to the parlor, hating himself as he had never hated anything in his life. He lay down on the couch, rolling a cigarette and spilling tobacco on his shirt. He sat up suddenly, throwing the half-made smoke into the scuttle near the parlor stove. Someone was knocking on the front door.

He went out to the front hall and opened the door, dread turning him sick and cold. Maybe Luke had died.

He stared out to the darkness on the veranda. Fran Heafy stood there, one hand lifted toward him. "Dan, I came to cook your supper. Dad said he'd wait at the doctor's."

She was smiling and her eyes were warm. He backed into the hall so she could pass him. "You shouldn't of," he said. "Fran, I ain't hungry. I—" He shut the door and followed her into the parlor.

The girl took off her dark coat and threw it on the couch. She turned to face him, her head held at a determined angle, her mouth firm, her eyes holding that look women get when they come to an important decision.

"Just sit down and I'll fix something in two shakes," she said in a tone of command, though she kept smiling at him.

And she turned to go in the kitchen.

THEY both heard the knock on the front door. It was a sharp, solid sound, as though someone were hammering the panel with a pistol but. Dan said, "I'll see who it is," and turned back through the hallway.

The door was locked. He turned the key, trying to make every move calm and steady though his heart slugged against his ribs. The door barged open abruptly and slammed against the wall. He jumped back—but not quickly enough.

The rim of a revolver muzzle made a hard round 0 against his belly, and the burly dust-and-sweat-streaked front of the man behind the steady, hairy hand was coming into the dim light of the hall. Dan raised his eyes slowly, feeling a crawling in his stomach, a knotting of a vein in his forehead.

The man had pale, piggy eyes, bleached brows, a pulpy nose, bulging jowls, a thick-lipped mouth, a brown ragged mustache. Dan's breath went out of him as though he had been rammed hard in the belly.

"Russ!" he gasped. "Russ Crowder!"

"Easy, Dan," the man said in a deep, curiously musical voice. "Hell, kid," he added, "it took us an hour to find your hangout. We been holed up in the lumber yard."

Dan's eyes shifted swiftly from left to right. Two other men were coming behind Crowder, one at each shoulder—ordinary, dusty men who kept watching the darkened street behind them, in front of the house. They had their guns out, too. One of them held a heavy black war bag.

The others were strangers to Dan, but Russ Crowder was not. Russ had been the leader of the bad bunch Dan had fallen in with four years ago, a thousand miles from Grand City. Dan backed through the arch into the parlor. The door slammed. The three men came in, blinking, their guns held hip-high.

The one to Crowder's left was hardly more than a kid, with scare-widened moist eyes and a wet, blond curl of hair sticking out under the sweatband of his hat. The heavy revolver in his hand was making little, jerky circles.

The third man was a lean, murderous-looking old-timer. Dan whipped around, expecting to see Fran Heafy behind him in the parlor, but she had disappeared.

Russ Crowder, mistaking Dan's sudden move, yelled, "Stand still, kid."

But Dan swung his head around and stared at the three men. They were the ones, he knew, who had held up the bank; the ones who had fired three slugs into Luke McAbee's back. Hate flamed up in Dan and he reached down for his father's blue Colt on his belt.

A gunshot, empty as the slamming of a door in a vast, high room, shook the air. A dirty orange spurt of flame came from Crowder's gun, and a haze of splinters fanned out from the frame of the window near Dan. The .45 bullet left a shattered gash in the oiled wood. Dan froze motionless, his right elbow in a bend, his fingers clawing out and freezing that way.

"That's it, kid," Crowder said. "Now lift your hands so I can admire 'em—right up over your head."

Dan obeyed. His eyes were only thin blue streaks between the narrowed lids. "Why'd you come here?" he said in a harsh, driving voice.

Crowder's pale eyes glinted. "Hell, kid, you didn't reckon I'd forgit you? After bein' pards like we was once?" His laugh came harshly. "We got in this mornin' and asked around for you. You never tol' me your old man was marshal of this burg."

Dan kept his hands up grudgingly, not quite shoulder high. "Get out of here," he said in a gritty voice. "Get out, Crowder, or I'll—"

The big man's blunt face screwed up with mock hurt. "That's a helluva way to treat a pard. All we want is to hole up here for a couple days, and then you kin git us some horses and—"

There was a sharp noise from the kitchen behind Dan. The three men heard it, and Crowder snarled, "Craw, see who's in there!" He kept Dan covered with his gun, and now his eyes were torn with alarm. "Who you got here with you, boy?"

THE blond kid slid past Dan and Dan heard his boots clump down the hall. An instant later came Fran Heafy's scream. Dan dove at Crowder. It was a piston-driven lunge that carried him three yards before the big man fired his sixgun.

The slug tore into the flesh of Dan's left arm and staggered him, but he came on and his fist slogged into Crowder's jaw. The old man behind Crowder moved with astonishing agility and struck at Dan with his gun barrel. Dan crumpled to the floor, all the fight gone out of him.

When he came to he saw Fran in the grip of the blond gunman. The kid was behind her, his hand pushing her, the gun

wavering at her back. Crowder and the old-timer stood in the middle of the parlor, watching Dan with stolid menace in their eyes.

"Try any more tricks," Crowder warned, "and I'll put a bullet through your damned gizzard."

"All this shootin'," croaked the old-timer, "is a-goin' to draw trouble like honey draws bees!"

"Shut up, Hazzie," Crowder snapped. To Dan, who was rising to his feet in a dazed way, he said, "If anybuddy comes, you'll tell 'em nuthin's wrong here. Savvy?"

Dan's left arm hung limp. Blood dripped off his finger tips. With stiff lips, frozen jaws, he gasped, "Don't hurt that girl." Then he saw his gun belt and gun in Crowder's hand. The big man had stripped it off his waist while he lay on the floor knocked out.

Fran stood motionless with the blond gunman behind her. Her face was a ghastly white, her eyes round and wide and almost black with fear and disbelief. "Dan," she moaned. "Oh, Dan!"

"You savvy, boy," Crowder said, "that if you try anything, or you holler for help —Craw's trigger finger might slip!"

Dan stared, dry-mouthed, hot-eyed. His lips moved but no sound came. Crowder turned to the kid gunman. "Take her into one of the bedrooms and tie her up. Stay close, hear?"

Craw nodded and started pulling Fran down the hall. Dan moved to follow them, but Crowder's gun came up. "He won't hurt her, kid, long as you do what you're told. You got anything to drink in the house?"

"In the kitchen," Dan sighed and went over and sank down on the couch, his left arm held down straight, his right hand clapped to the wound just below his shoulder. He was filled with a violent nausea. The smell of gunpowder all through the house didn't help to quiet his lurching stomach. "There's a bottle of whiskey in the kitchen," he gasped.

Both men went down the hall and he heard them clattering about toward the rear of the house. There was a curious deadness inside as if these three thugs, these men who had brutally shot Luke down, had suddenly become figures he had dreamed up and neither despised nor hated. His wound had stopped bleeding, but his arm from shoulder to finger tips was without feeling.

Then he was aware that Russ Crowder had come back to the parlor and was standing before him, a big, frog-bellied, frog-faced man with icy colorless eyes that were too small.

Crowder was saying, "We've changed our minds, kid. In a couple hours you can go out and round up three horses and bring 'em around this house. This town's too hot for us."

Dan heard a gurgling sound and looked up slowly. Crowder was drinking from the whiskey bottle, gulping it down loudly. The big man swiped a hand across his lips and said, "Sorry we had to shoot your old man. We didn't know it was him till we heard a couple of boys talkin' in the lumber yard."

"You killed him," Dan said in a soft, very soft voice. "You plugged him in the back!"

"Tough," the big man said. "Only you better not ever let on who done it. And you better tell your lady-friend to keep her lip buttoned, too. We don't—"

A HEAVY hammering on the front door stopped Crowder in mid-sentence. His hand flew under his coat and came out with his gun fisted and cocked. Staring, Dan saw the crafty look on that flabby face.

"Go and see who it is, Dan," Crowder murmured. "Tell 'em you're all right. Tell 'em to go away—because if you double-cross me, kid, I'll blab about that

barkeep you killed down in Tonopah! Remember?"

Dan stared at the big man incredulously. "*I* killed him? Why, you—"

The banging on the door grew louder. Crowder jerked his bullet-shaped head toward the front hall. "Go on, kid. I'll be here, listenin'."

Dan stumbled into the hallway and reached the door. He leaned against it a moment, fighting his fear, trying to think. He let his dead left arm hang down beside him, and he opened the door with his right.

Sheriff Ed Heafy stood before him on the veranda—big, broad, quiet, his eyes glinting with dim light reflected from the parlor. "Anything wrong, Dan?" Ed asked matter-of-factly. "When you and Fran didn't come back I got to thinkin'—"

"Nothin's wrong," Dan answered in a voice he tried to make even and calm. He kept his left side turned away from the sheriff. "Fran—went home. She cooked me some supper and I—"

Ed remained on the darkened porch. Dan couldn't read his expression. "It's near eight o'clock," Ed said quietly. "We got to start lookin' for them."

"How's —Dad?" Dan's voice came steady through sheer willpower. He felt faint. "I was comin' over there and—"

"Doc got the slugs out of him," said the sheriff. "Now if his heart holds out—"

"It won't," Dan said in a flat tone that echoed hollowly out under the veranda roof. "He'll die."

Ed shook his big-hatted head impatiently. "Don't think about it, Dan. Come on now. I've deputized three more men and they're waitin' at the lumber yard. We got to search every saloon and cellar in town. The longer we put it off the better chance those thugs'll have to git clean away."

"I—" Dan breathed, "I can't come with you now." He lifted his right hand and fumbled with the marshal's star on his shirt. He got it loose and handed it out to the sheriff who took it in silence. "I—ain't man enough to wear Dad's badge," Dan said harshly. "He made me pin it on, but I can't."

A kind of groaning sigh came from the sheriff. Then his voice said, coldly, scornfully, "By God, you're yeller!" There was a long moment of silence, and Dan felt the sheriff's contempt as a heat searing him.

Ed snapped, "Maybe it'll be better if Luke does die. If he ever found out—" Then he whipped his big bulk around and marched down the veranda steps. Dan saw his shadow fade out to the darkness of the street, heard his big boots pounding down the walk.

Dan closed the door just by leaning against it. He sagged there through long seconds, his knees weakening and almost crumpling him to the floor. Cold sweat bathed his forehead and made streaks down along his jaw. He heard Russ Crowder call softly from the parlor: "Nice work, kid. Now come and have a drink."

Dan staggered back into the parlor lamplight. Crowder stood with his back to the wall, his gun out and in a hairy hand, the whiskey bottle, now half empty, in the other. His red-rimmed, hog-like eyes gleamed at Dan and he held the bottle out. Dan waved it away.

The old-timer shuffled in from the kitchen, his gray, lank face wrinkled with a vapid grin. "Russ, gimme another pull at that likker." He came into the room, a bony hand outstretched. "I'm drier'n a gagged bartender."

Crowder passed the bottle to the old man, said, "Take it in and give Craw a slug. Tell him if that gal starts yippin' he knows what to do."

On the sofa, Dan's muscles knotted and his shoulders bunched. He said, thickly, "You got to get out of here. That was the sheriff at the door just now. He'll—"

CROWDER went over and looked out behind a drawn window shade and then came back, walking wide and heavy like a bear. "Kid," he said in his deep musical voice, "it's right handsome of you to worry about me and the boys. Only we don't wanter git rushed none. They got this burg ringed around with about fifty deppities. Here's the safest place we 'uns c'd be for the next few hours."

"That girl," Dan said heavily, "is the sheriff's daughter. He'll go over to his house and find out I lied to him. And he'll come back, shootin' both guns."

"That," the big outlaw said, "would be a shame. 'Cause then we'd have to kill him and his gal, too."

Dan sat forward on the couch, his head hung down, staring at the floor, his crippled arm hanging like a loose, broken stick from his shoulder. He thought about the closet in his father's bedroom, about the guns hanging inside, those shining, well-oiled, black-butted guns. If he could only think of some reason—some way—

The vicious-faced old-timer came shuffling back down the hall and handed Crowder the almost empty bottle. The old outlaw snickered, his thin voice fizzing through toothless gums, "Craw was dry, too. The gal ain't makin' any trouble."

Crowder finished off what was in the bottle and tossed it into a corner, easing his heavy body down to a straight-backed chair. He held his big six-shooter in his hand and let it swing like a pendulum from hairy fingers and hairy wrist. His eyes, pinned steadily on Dan's averted face, were cold and cruel and crafty, like the orbs of a savage wild boar. Hazzie, the old gunman, turned and scuffed back down the hall toward the kitchen.

After a while Crowder got up and went over to where the kid outlaw had dropped the black war-bag. He lifted it and came across the room, shambling, cumbersome, muttering, "I'll jest leave this out back where we kin git it fast if we got to."

Dan tensed on the sofa. His eyes shifted behind lowered lids and he saw the big man move into the hall, heard his boots thud away. Slowly, cautiously, Dan rose to his feet. Now, he thought. *Now!*

He jumped toward the hall, moving swiftly, like a dancer, on his toes, all of his movements soundless. He was in the hall. It lay before him, twenty feet long, with the kitchen at the far end.

His father's door was the first one on the left. Beyond it a band of light came through the door of his own room where the kid gunman had Fran. Voices mumbled in the kitchen, and Crowder's body made a huge and grotesque shadow on the floor in there.

Dan reached the door of his father's room, turned the knob with his good hand, and sprang into darkness like the bottom of a well. At the same instant he heard Crowder's boots come clumping back down the hall. He held his breath, came against the closet door, felt for the knob, opened the door.

He saw Crowder's massive shape slide past the hall door, heard his grunting breaths. Dan's hand reached into the closet, closed on a cartridge belt hanging from a hook. His fingers slid down and the holster and the gun in it.

The cold metal felt wonderful. He cocked the hammer, praying the weapon had a full load. He had to gamble on it. There was no time. He heard Crowder yelling, "He's gone! Why, that—"

Dan jumped back into the hall.

He felt sick, hot and cold. Every nerve in his lean body whipped taut. His crippled left arm got in his way as he crouched in the semi-darkness of the hall and stared toward the parlor.

Crowder was in there, bungling around, looking. His savage cursing was muffled. Flattened hard against the wall in the cordor, Dan considered breaking back and into his own room where Craw, the murderous kid, was holding Fran. But

there was no time for anything except to do what he now knew he had to do—get Russ Crowder.

He heard Hazzie coming out of the kitchen behind him. The old-timer was puzzled by the racket Crowder was making in the parlor. Dan whipped around to face the old man. He saw his gangling form bulk up in the kitchen door and heard him cackle, "Wottsamatter, Russ?"

DAN raised the heavy revolver toward Hazzie's approaching shape. At the same instant, the old-timer saw him and saw him and froze in his tracks. But his bony right hand dove down and under his coat in a snaky swift movement.

Dan squeezed the trigger hard. But the hammer fell with an empty click.

Hazzie's gun went off a second later, down low in front of him. The bullet whanged past Dan's head. Dust, smoke, a blinding flash, the huge echo of the gun's report in the narrow hall—all that swirled around Dan. He squeezed the trigger again, his lips drawn back, his right arm straightened out before him.

The revolver roared and kicked in his hand. He fired again. Through the flash of the two reports he saw Hazzie stagger backward into the kitchen. It was as if an invisible hand had slapped the deadly old-timer on the chest. Dust spurted out of his coat as two bullets crashed home. Hazzie broke at the knees, then at the hips, and then toppled sideways out of sight.

Fran Heafy's shrill scream tore through the house. Dan hipped around, cross-ripped—Craw, the killer kid, was coming out of the other bedroom; and Crowder was charging in at the end of the hall.

The kid was at his back as Dan swung the barrel of his revolver toward Russ Crowder, and Crowder's huge, top-heavy body seemed to block out all the light in the parlor. Then came the long, thin needle of flame from the gun in Crowder's hand.

Lead slapped through Dan's coat between his right arm and his ribs. He fired at Crowder, wondering if he had a chance.

The shot merged with another behind Dan. Crowder's breath gusted, and he stopped as if he had run against a brick wall. Dan felt a large lazy blow in his side. It spun him around quite painlessly, a half turn around, facing the puff of smoke from the gun in Craw's hand not ten feet away.

Dan's legs were suddenly tired and he staggered to make his turn complete so he would still be facing the kid. He fell in slow motion, with the barrel of his gun lined on the kid's chest. That barrel spat flame once, and Dan felt the hard jar of the shot go up his arm like an electric shock. But he didn't hear the flat thunder of that report or see the young outlaw go down—kicking, thrashing, screaming, a bullet in the groin.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Dan McAbee in dream-like sequences of light and shadow and pain in his shoulder and side. He kept hearing voices around him, mumbling, buzzing, whispering. Someone was pulling off his boots. He tried to resist it. He got his eyes open and saw Fran Heafy standing above him, very pale but very calm, her mouth set in a firm red line, her teeth biting her lip.

The room was his own, and he was on the bed, a blanket over him. There were people in the room, and they were talking. Fran's eyes touched his face and brightened. Her smile came next, dazzling in its relief. "Dan," she whispered. "Oh, Dan."

The men in the room stopped talking and it was quiet. Dan looked into Fran's face and tried to smile. "I'm okay," he said, and tried to sit up. But the pain slashed through him and he sank back with a groan.

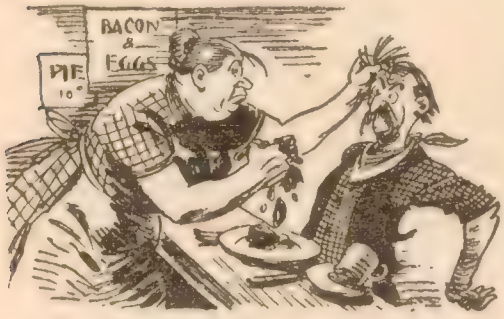
The girl was on her knees beside the

(Continued on Page 130)

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

By Robbins and Farren

A strong sense of fair play was characteristic of all the early West, but the people of the town of Fairchild, Texas, probably hold the record for bending over backwards in that respect. In order to raise money to buy a new town pump, they held a raffle, tickets selling at a dollar apiece, the winner to receive a free trip to St. Louis. When the winning ticket was drawn, it belonged to Fred Stewart, who had just been sentenced to a ten-year prison term. But the Texans were good sports. They turned the jailbird loose and sent him out to St. Louis. Said Sheriff Charlie Rickert: "The honor of Fairchild was at stake. What else could we do?"



A phenomenon that is common in all pioneer countries is the tendency of pioneer parents to name their children after the great heroes whose lives have marked the land. This happened widely throughout the American West. Children were named "Daniel Boone" Smith, "Betty Zane" Brown, and so forth. Most popular was the ill-fated General Custer—at one time, an historian noted eighteen hundred Custer namesakes through the West, but he noted one who thought that Custer had gotten his just deserts, for they named their child "Chief Sitting Bull" Gerhardt.

Legal historians who have been fascinated by the informal courtroom history of the Old West have noted that one of the most frequent offenses was bigamy. The crime was dealt with almost as sternly as cattle rustling and those who were accused often invented the most extraordinary excuses. Probably the most successful was the one offered by a Dallas cowboy who was asked by the judge to explain why he had married one wife in Dallas when he had another in El Paso. The cowboy scratched his head, looked around at both of his indignant spouses, and said, simply, "I forgot." Impressed by his honesty, the judge dismissed the case.

Ma Blake, owner of a large trackside restaurant near Denver, was a good cook, but sensitive about it. Even in her early days, criticism from a customer about the toughness of a steak or a pie-crust upset her terribly and she would weep for days when anyone left a portion uneaten on a plate. Later, however, she grew more hardened and more insistent. When a diner sent word to the kitchen that a chop or a soup bowl was not exactly to his liking, or when someone in a hurry left a forkful on his plate, Ma would run out from behind her stove, and rub the food in the customer's hair. After that, few dared to leave any behind.

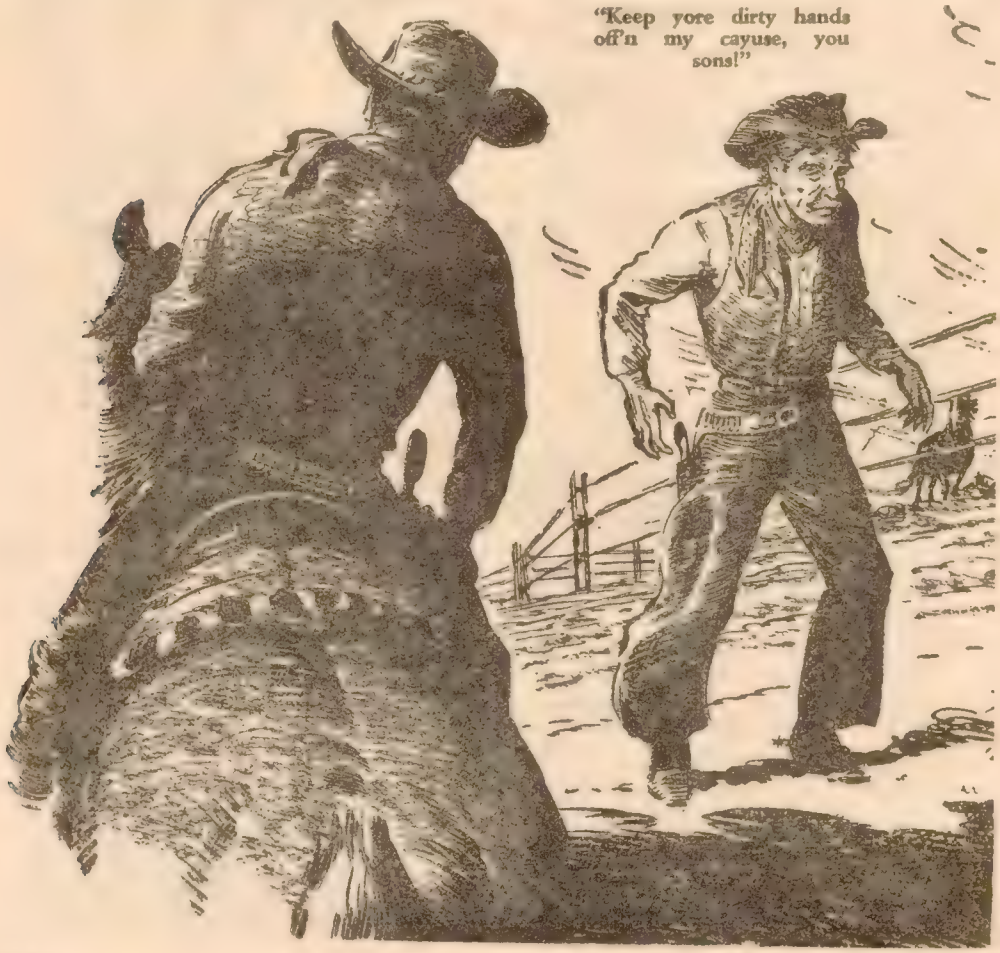
TOWN OF MISSING MEN

By BARRY CORD

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man's Room

INTO THE BORDER town of Celeste, of a hot summer's evening, jogged a pint-sized rider slumped wearily in his saddle. Coming in from the river trail he entered town through the squalid Mexican quarter and jogged up Santa Ana Avenue. Not until his bay had turned into Texas Square did he straighten and look about



"Keep yore dirty hands off'n my cayuse, you sons!"

Between Windy Harris, salty, pint-sized saddle-bum, and the partner he was searching for, stood three things—the notorious Sinbad, barkeep of a Robbers' Roost, whose lips were sealed by fear . . . the fabulous Roc, tequila-swigging parakeet who knew the story, but couldn't talk . . . and the mysterious ghost of Coronado that walked at night—and shot from the hip like any damned killer!

Fast-Moving Novelette of a Border Brigade

him. What he saw was not very much.

He had been in Celeste before, as he had been in most towns in the Southwest during his fifty-odd years in saddle. He found the town unchanged since his last visit.

Misnamed by the pious padre who had founded the village more than a hundred years before, Celeste was a long way from approaching heaven, either in the piety of its sinful inhabitants, or in the varied odors peculiar to it. It had been a Spanish town, and then a Mexican town for most of its somnolent existence, and the comparatively recent advent of the tall Texans from the north had split the town into two factions and created a tension as deadly as a cocked .45.

Of this last Windy Harris was dimly aware and not at all interested. He had come to Celeste to meet his partner, and already he was a day late. This explained his growing irritation, for Long Jim had an acid tongue when it came to such matters.

There were four saloons in Texas Square with a reputation for toughness that extended a long way on both sides of the border. Of these, Sinbad's Robbers' Roost was the most notorious.

Toward this the bay turned of its own accord, and Windy's pale blue eyes scanned the hipshot animals nosing the rail. He was surprised to find that Long Jim's roan was not among them.

"Damn that long-legged galoot!" he grumbled. "Probably stopped off to see that widder over at Lone Pine."

He had crowded the bay all the way in from Zeno, and on the way he had concocted a glib explanation for his delay. But now that it seemed he had arrived in Celeste first, he discarded his explanation and fell back upon a righteous anger.

"If this is Thursday, *I'm* on time," he growled belligerently. Dismounting stiffly, he turned to the saloon.

Sinbad's was already crowded when he entered. The gaming tables were doing a lively business, but such was the character of the players that all heads turned at his entrance, all eyes took on a sudden, sharp appraisal. For a fraction of an instant Windy felt himself weighed—and dismissed.

Unconsciously he took a hitch at his sagging gun belt and headed for Sinbad's famous bar. Built like the prow of a Yankee clipper ship complete with figurehead of a naked woman, the bar jutted fifteen feet into the large room.

Sinbad moved behind it. The ex-sailor was a short, red-haired man of about forty-five, built like a whale oil vat. He ran his place of business like a captain on the deck of his ship, enforcing his orders by bellow, mallet and, in extreme cases, the six-shooter he kept handy under the counter.

There were some who muttered that Sinbad, who laid claim to having sailed the seven seas with the pirate Lafitte, had never trod the deck of a craft larger than a river barge. But they were careful to utter this blasphemy safely out of Sinbad's hearing.

As notorious as Sinbad and his unique bar was the Roc, a profane, evil-smelling parakeet with a penchant for tequila and garlic. The Roc usually had the run of the bar, waddling confidently among the customers and soliciting drinks. He had an evil temper and was not above nipping horny fingers when a drink was not quickly forthcoming.

Sinbad was watching a game at the nearby table when Windy put his foot on the rail and pushed his dusty Stetson back on his graying head. The Roc, quick to sense a victim, sidled over and eyed him with a bleary stare.

Windy ignored him. "Hey!" he called to Sinbad. "Hey, garçon!"

Sinbad turned a scowling face to the oldster. He was not used to being addressed like an errand boy, and by a man old enough to be his father.

The Roc was getting impatient. He craned his head toward Windy's fingers, but Harris forestalled his intention by dropping his battered headgear over the parakeet and pushing both unceremoniously aside.

Sinbad's manner was hostile as he came toward Windy. Windy rubbed sand out of his grizzled mustache. "Hey!" he said guilelessly. "This Thursday—June the seventh?"

"What?"

Windy repeated the question.

A cautious look replaced the hostility in Sinbad's eyes. "Wal, I thought it was —until you began asking." He turned and bellowed to a tall man dealing faro at the table. "Hey, Tripp! This Thursday?"

The gambler flicked a card onto the table and glanced at Windy. "Who in hell wants to know?"

Sinbad jerked a thumb at the bristling oldster. "This sawed-off—" He didn't see Windy draw. But he found himself suddenly looking into the gaping muzzle of a Frontier Colt, and he lost his voice.

Windy turned. "You!" he addressed the man Sinbad had called Tripp. "What day is it?"

The gambler kept a blank face. In a business that placed a premium on gunplay for survival, he had few peers. He carried a hideout gun up his sleeve, a snub-nosed Henry under his left arm. But he usually relied on the Colt on his hip, being known by this peculiarity as "Square-Shooting-Tripp."

"Sorry," he apologized. "This is Thursday."

"That's better," Windy retorted coldly. "Next time a gent old enough to be yore paw asks yuh a civil question, see that yuh give him a civil answer." He dropped his Colt back into scuffed holster, took a hitch at his belt, and added: "I'm buyin'. Want to join me?"

Tripp hesitated a bare moment. Sinbad nodded slightly and he shrugged. "Don't mind if I do just exactly that, pop."

WINDY'S dusty hat was wobbling along the counter when he retrieved it. Relieved of the blanketing headgear, the Roc shook his ruffled feathers and swore luridly.

Windy grinned. "Give him a drink," he told Sinbad. Turning to the gambler, he said, "What you havin'?"

"Sinbad knows my brand." As he drank he let his glance take inventory of the older man. Windy's appearance had fooled many men, to their later sorrow. Despite his age, he was leather tough, and he had preserved an uncanny agility in unlimbering his hardware.

Tripp's inventory, however, checked off an old man on the bum. There entered into the gambler's conversation a bit of good humor, a trait at variance with his character, which was as sharp as honed steel and as coldly impersonal.

"What's so important about Thursday, pop?" he asked, sliding his glass back to Sinbad for a refill.

"The name's Harris," Windy said coldly.

Tripp smiled thinly. "You're pretty salty for your years."

Sinbad leaned over the bar. "You ride in by way of Dead Injun Canyon, Harris?"

"No," Windy said. "I came down the river from Zeno."

"Yo're lucky," Sinbad said. "Last two gents who came in that way were still white from having met up with Coronado's ghost."

Windy took a long look at his drink, then pushed it aside. "Say that again," he asked suspiciously. *"Whose ghost?"*

Sinbad pushed the Roc away from his drink. *"I* haven't seen the cuss," he growled. "But some crazy galoot in Spanish armor has been raising merry hell around here. He's held up the Laredo stage so many times we hear they're send-

ing a U. S. Marshal down to clean up the mess."

"There's an old Spanish fort up on the hill overlooking the canyon trail," added Tripp. "They say it was put up by Coronado himself, and that it's his ghost that comes riding down at night." The gambler shrugged. "I ain't seen him myself, but the Mexes in town are getting mighty blowed up over him."

"Sure," Sinbad added harshly. "There's no doubt the gent comes from the Mex part of town. He's been raiding Bar M beef, too. Big Tim McCutcheon, who runs the spread, has got a temper that boils easy. He's getting set to take his men into the Mex quarter for a cleanup."

"Sounds like trouble for Celeste," agreed Windy, who was always more than willing to meet trouble halfway. "Too bad I won't be stayin' for the fun. I'm waitin' for my partner to show up. We got business up north."

Tripp added: "You expecting him today?"

Windy nodded. "A long-legged galoot a mite younger than me. Wears a greasy J.B., rides a Circle E roan, an' is always hungry. Answers to the name of Long Jim Evers. Seen him?"

Tripp put his drink down in a deliberate gesture. "If that gent is your partner," he said, "you won't be seeing him again. Not this side of hell, anyway."

Windy stiffened. "Meanin'?"

"A jasper answering to that description pulled in yesterday morning," Tripp answered. "Asked the same damn fool question. This Thursday, June the seventh? When he found out different he went on down the street, got himself a room at One-Eyed Crowley's place, came out and rode away. One of the boys saw him leave town. He was riding with a Mex kid named Juan—heading for Dead Injun Canyon."

"Mebbe he just went for a ride."

"Yeah," Tripp sneered. "Maybe he did. But if you look in Crowley's stable, you'll find his roan. There's a bullet scar just back of the saddle. One of the Bar M riders found the cayuse on his way in to town. No sign of anyone around, so he brought the animal in and turned it over to Crowley."

Windy was turning away before the other finished. "Thanks," he said grimly. "Guess I'll take a look at Long Jim's cayuse."

CROWLEY'S place was down the street. Windy pulled up at the rail and eyed the thin man with the black patch over his eye who was chewing a toothpick.

"You Crowley?"

The other looked Windy over with deadpan stare. "I am," he nodded. "Who in hell are you?"

Windy took a hitch at his temper. "The name's Harris," he snapped. "I'm lookin' for a roan with a white left stockin' an' a daub on its nose."

Crowley straightened. "Such a cayuse is in my stable," he admitted. "I'm keepin' him there until the gent who owns him pays his bill. Seven dollars even."

"You'll get yore money," Windy said. "I want to take a look at the cayuse."

The other jerked a thumb toward the alley. "Go ahead," he permitted airily. "But make sure you leave *yore* bronc out front here."

Windy dismounted and tied his bay to the sagging rail. Anger was boiling up in him as he walked toward the other.

"Lissen, you one-eyed polecat!" he snarled. "I'm takin' a look at Long Jim's cayuse. One more crack outta you an' I'll take that gun yo're wearin' an' stuff it down yore windpipe."

Crowley sneered. "Why, you sawed-off runt—"

The Frontier made a magic appearance in Windy's palm. He teetered on his toes, a hot eagerness in his blue eyes.

"You was sayin'?" he challenged softly.

Crowley swallowed. "Go ahead," he said.

Harris nodded. "That's a whole lot better," he sneered. "I seen a lot of bad-mannered gents in my time. But not so many in one place as in this excuse for a town. Looks like some of you gents are going to need a course in ettiket."

Crowley made no comment.

Windy led the tired bay down the alley and into Crowley's barn. Long Jim's roan muzzled him as he approached and the bay gave a nicker of recognition. Windy's eyes were hard as he ran his fingers along the blood-encrusted scar on the roan's flank.

Why? he wondered angrily. Damn it, why Jim?

They had no known enemies in Celeste. He and Jim had split in Las Cruces, Windy turning south to see a granddaughter. Long Jim, sitting in a game of poker, had decided to stay on. "Meet you at Sinbad's in Celeste. Thursday, June the seventh."

Windy had remained longer than he had planned at his granddaughter's. And now he had come to Celeste to find this.

Crowley was still in the doorway when he came back. He stepped inside and Windy followed him to the desk.

"I'll be stayin' here a few days," he growled. "Give me Long Jim's room." He tossed a gold piece on the counter. "Take what he owes you out of this."

Crowley passed back his change. "Room seven. Upstairs."

Long Jim's room was hot and stuffy. Windy's image made a shadowy blur as he crossed in front of the dresser mirror. He paused in the middle of the room. The wide board floor was grooved and scarred from the tramping of previous spurred occupants. A beetle waddled leisurely across the floor and disappeared under the iron-framed bed.

Windy pushed his hat back on his head. "Cripes!" he growled. "The damn fool oughta pay *me* for sleepin' here!"

He walked to the window and opened it. Directly below lay the dark flat roof of the blacksmith shop next door. He turned back and paused by the chair where Long Jim's warbag lay unrolled. Jim's spare Colt peeked coyly at him from under a faded cotton shirt. There was a soiled towel on a nail by the dresser. Jim's pipe was by the washbasin. Windy recognized the chewed stem and the acrid odor of Yellow Buck tobacco.

He turned and walked to the bed and stood looking down at the rumpled blankets. Then he wheeled away and went down the stairs.

Crowley squeezed against the door framing and watched him head down the street toward Texas Square.

CHAPTER TWO

Backtrail of the Sixgun Ghost

THE two-bit lunch was next door to the stage stop of the Laredo-bound coach. Harris was on the stool next to the window when the stage came rattling into town, flanked by four mounted men. It pulled up a little ahead of the lunchroom and Windy heard one of the riders call out: "Good thing we happened along, eh, Sam?" The driver nodded.

Windy paid for his meal and walked out. The night was warm and the hills of Mexico were dark under the stars.

The stage had three passengers, a prim-faced women who walked swiftly into the waiting room, a fat whiskey drummer who remained to talk with the driver, and a tall man in his early forties who looked like a prosperous cattleman.

The tall man looked up at the riders. "Your name McCutcheon?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," one of them answered. Windy looked him over. Tim McCutcheon was a

big man, dark and solid in saddle. "You know me?"

The other shrugged. "I'm Dave Blake, United States Marshal."

McCutcheon rose in his stirrups. "Wal, fer cryin' out loud! Hey, fellers—here's the government man we been expectin'."

He dismounted and thrust out his hand. "One of the boys will take yore bay, Blake." McCutcheon had a way of taking over, Windy noticed. "I'll show you around this flea-bitten town, then we'll head back to my place. Yo're stayin' with us."

Blake let himself be led away. Windy found a Mexican cheroot in his vest pocket. He chewed on it silently. Marshal or no marshal, he'd do his own investigating in the morning.

THE old Spanish fort loomed up against the afternoon sky, its crumbled walls weathered and still. Windy reined in at the bottom of the wide draw and searched the slope for sign of a trail.

He had wasted most of the day looking for a kid named Juan in the Mexican section of town. The inhabitants had looked at him with blank stares. "Juan?" A shrug of the shoulders. "No sabe, señor."

Finally he had turned away and headed for Dead Indian Canyon. It had taken him two hours to get this close and now he pushed his hat up from his forehead, his eyes narrowing to the glare.

The bullet made an angry sound as it went past. Plowing into the opposite bank, it hit an exposed rock and went skittering off.

Windy was out of the saddle before the scream of the ricocheting bullet faded. He hugged the bank, a burning resentment in his eyes. His bulletwise bay had wheeled away and was running back down the draw. The hidden rifle laid another shot under the bay's heels, thereby spurring it to greater speed. Windy watched the animal fade toward Celeste.

He was in a nice pickle. He had been given no time to draw his saddle gun, and a Frontier Colt, while deadly at close range, was no match for a Winchester.

The longer he stayed under the cutbank, the longer he fretted. He couldn't risk sticking his head up for a look at the fort, and he had no way of knowing if the sniper had moved. After some moments, he decided to move.

He went up the draw on his hands and knees, keeping to the shelter of the bank. Several hundred yards ahead he ran into a smaller arroyo that angled in from the low sand hills to the south. Ten minutes later he wriggled up a small slope and surveyed the old fort.

Perhaps the first shot had merely been a warning to keep away. The sniper had made no further move to finish what he had started. In any case, he couldn't get close without running the risk of being picked off—there was no cover up the slope.

He made a wide circle back toward town and started walking, cursing his high-heeled boots. All the way into town he kept looking for Trooper. He had expected to find the bay grazing somewhere along the way. Trooper was not the type to wander far. But he saw no sign of the animal, and his wrath increased in direct proportion to his aching feet.

He came into Celeste through the Mexican quarter. Black suspicious eyes watched him plod down the street. He came out into Texas Square, and was passing the raucous din from Sinbad's, when Trooper neighed.

Windy stopped. His bay was tied to Sinbad's rail, tugging at its reins. A short, stocky blond man with a nose mashed into his ugly face was trying to unhitch Trooper. Two others, slim, hard-looking hombres, were already in saddle, evidently waiting for him.

Flat-Nose finally freed the bay and yanked the animal's head around with a

savage oath. "Whoa, you barrel-bellied mule! I'll teach you to—"

"Hey!" Windy cut in sharply. "What in hell you think yo're doin'?"

The other wheeled around, staring in astonishment at the pint-sized oldster coming toward him. His two companions turned and looked down with thin amusement at the wrath in Windy's face.

"That's my cayuse yo're kickin'!" Windy snapped. "Keep yo're dirty hands off him!"

One of the mounted men guffawed.

Flat-Nose reached out and with a quick jerk pulled Windy's hat down over his eyes. "Go wan, hightail it," he said contemptuously. "Before I boot you down the street!"

Windy pushed his hat up on his head. His face was white. The other was looking at him, sneering, a hand resting on the heel of his Colt. "Get goin'!"

Windy kicked him in the shins. It was a healthy boot, and it brought a howl from Flat-Nose. He doubled and made a grab for his pained shins.

Windy reached out with his left hand and got his fingers in the other's neckerchief. He pulled the stocky man forward with the motion, and laid the side of his Frontier Colt across the man's head.

Flat-Nose folded up without a grunt.

The two riders were caught short. Surprise replaced the grins on their faces. Windy balanced on his toes, his gun measuring them. "You gents backin' this hoss-thief?" he asked harshly.

The nearer man shook his head. "Yo're makin' a mistake, pop. We ran across this cayuse on the edge of town. Nobody was claimin' him."

"I'm claimin' him now," Windy interrupted grimly. "Any objections?"

The other shrugged. "None—if you say so, pop."

Windy stepped over the man he had buffaloed and climbed into saddle. The disturbance had evidently reached the ears of men inside Sinbad's, for a half dozen customers pushed through the slatted doors. Tripp was among them.

"Well, well," the gambler said smugly. "If it ain't the salty oldster who's lookin' for his partner. Didn't expect to see you again, after Plug told us about findin' yore cayuse. What happened, pop?"

"Nothin' you mebbe don't know about!" Windy snapped.

Tripper smiled. "Meanin'?"

"Meanin' if I don't find my partner soon, I'm comin' back to Sinbad's to ask questions. An' I'm gonna get answers!"

Tripp sneered. "You talk big with a gun in yore hand, pop."

Windy slid the gun into the holster and settled back in the saddle. "My hand's empty," he baited grimly. "I got gray in my beard an' I'm old enough to be yore pop. Now what are you goin' to do about it?"

The sneer ironed out on the gambler's lips, and a strange chill ran down his back. In that moment he saw Windy Harris for the first time—saw Death personified, poised and waiting.

"I'll see you later," he muttered harshly. He was backing down in front of a half-dozen onlookers, but for the life of him he couldn't get up enough nerve to go for his gun. "I'll see you when you come around for those questions." His voice was without emphasis. "Later."

Windy laughed, a short and contemptuous sound. He backed the bay away from the rail, avoiding Plug who was getting to his feet. Then he whirled the animal around and sent it pounding up the street.

CROWLEY was picking his teeth with the blade of a jacknife when Windy pulled up. He looked surprised to see him.

"I'm back," Windy growled. "Didn't you expect me?"

"Can't say I did," the other answered unconcernedly.

Windy dismounted, and limped toward the door. "Get my cayuse into the stall an' grain-feed him. An' I want a bucket of hot water an' a pound of rock salt brought up to my room."

Crowley resumed picking his teeth. "There'll be a service charge of fifty cents," he said airily.

Windy tossed him the money. "The service better be good," he muttered grimly, and limped past the man.

His room was still hot and stuffy and the faded curtains hung limply against the open window. Windy sat down on the bed and pulled off his boots and socks and relaxed across the rumpled blankets.

He was half asleep when a wrinkle-faced Mexican came into the room, lugging a bucket of lukewarm water and a brick of rock salt. Windy sat up. He dropped the salt into the water and eased his feet into the bucket. He gave a blissful sigh.

He let his feet soak while he thought over the day's events. His visit to the old fort had netted one result. Evidently he was not to be allowed to go poking his nose around the Spanish ruins.

After a while he dried his feet, put on clean socks, and hung his gun belt from the bed post near his head. He lay back on the bed. The light was fading against the window. He felt hungry, but he was too tired to get up. He tried to think about Long Jim, and why his partner had ridden out of town with a Mex kid named Juan toward Dead Indian Canyon. But he fell asleep before he had fully framed the question.

It was dark when he awakened. Someone had kicked a can on the roof outside his window. He listened, suddenly alert. A boot made a scuffing sound and a voice said, "Shhhh!" in a sibilant whisper. Iron clanked thinly in the night. Then a head silhouetted itself in the open window.

Windy rolled over and reached for his Colt.

A long leg was thrust across the sill. Windy rolled off the bed and reached for the intruder in one quick motion. He caught the man's groping arm and yanked him inside. At the same time he brought the flat side of his Colt down.

He missed the man's bare head. His Colt glanced across the man's shoulders and rang against metal. Windy grunted in sharp astonishment.

The prowler recovered and flailed at Windy. A bony fist caught Harris in the right eye, sending him staggering. He tripped against the bed and the intruder jumped on him, driving a knee into his stomach.

Windy rolled free. He lost his Colt as the man's fist chopped across his wrist. He tried to twist erect, but long fingers closed around his throat. He fell back on the bed, bunching up like a snarling cat. He drew his legs under him and against the tall man's stomach. He gave a heave and the prowler went straight up like a man doing a handspring, and came clanking down heavily on the other side.

Windy rolled off the bed and lunged for his faintly glinting Colt. "You play pretty rough," he sneered, getting his back against the wall. "Now come around the bed an'—"

"Holy sufferin' dogies!" a familiar voice exploded. *"Windy Harris!"*

Windy stiffened. "It ain't you," he said suspiciously. "Damn it, it can't be you, Jim! Yo're dead!"

"The hell I am!" the other snapped. He came around the bed toward Windy. "What in hell you doin' in my room?" he demanded peevishly.

"Hey, Harris!" a voice interrupted pettishly from the hallway. "What are you doin' in there?"

Windy walked to the door and opened it. Crowley was holding a lantern and squinting suspiciously past him.

"I had a nightmare," Windy growled. "Any objections?"

Crowley craned his neck to peer into the darkened room. "Next time you have nightmares," he said truculently, "have them somewhere else. The other guests want to sleep."

He turned and shuffled back to the lobby. Windy closed the door and leaned against it.

Long Jim was standing by the open window. "Juan," he whispered. "It's all right. Come on in."

A shadow showed up in the window opening. Jim put a hand on Juan's shoulder and drew him inside.

"Draw the shade, Windy," he ordered. "We got a powwow coming up."

WINDY obeyed. The yellow light brought out the cracks in the wall and the cobwebs in the corners. He turned and stared at Long Jim. "No wonder I thought I was fightin' an anvil," he grumbled. "What in hell you doin' in that iron getup?"

Long Jim was in no mood for levity. He had a dirty red bandana tied around his head. Dry blood made a brown daub over his left eye. Spanish chest armor encased his upper body, accentuating the length of his free swinging arms. His yellow hair was tousled, and his long beard-roughened face was grim.

"Never mind the getup," he growled. "I'll explain later." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "This is Juan de Pesa. If it wasn't for him I'd probably be still rotting in the old dungeons under the presidio."

Juan was about sixteen—a dark-faced youth with a scar spoiling the handsomeness of his boyish face. He grinned at Windy. "I scare you, señor? Huh?"

Windy scowled. "What?"

"I shoot at you," Juan said unconcernedly. "I not know you are Jeem's fren'. I think, mebbe you come to keel Jeem. I shoot—an' I mees. No good, huh?"

"You mean no good, yes," Windy snapped. "So yo're the hombre who made me walk home."

Long Jim interrupted. "Damn this armor. Help me take it off, Juan."

The boy complied. Windy leaned against the wall. "I thought you were dead!" he repeated sourly. "Instead I find you rompin' around in tin plate. What's the idea, Jim?"

Long John grinned tightly. "I'm Coronado's ghost."

"Yo're what?"

Long Jim nodded. "They made a mistake," he said, "when they picked me for their dummy. They were gettin' scared, now that the Laredo Stage Line's sendin' a marshal down to investigate. An' they weren't too happy about McCutcheon. If he ever suspected who was raidin' his cows, he'd come in shootin'.

"So they figgered to rope a stranger an' pass him off as the gent in armor. Nice an' simple, *they thought*. Grab the first hombre who rode into Celeste that looked tall enough to be passed off as Coronado's ghost—"

"Coronado was a big man," Juan corrected patriotically. "Not tall an' skinny."

"To hell with that!" Long Jim snapped. "Nobody around here knows the difference. Anyway, mebbe ghosts lose weight after they're dead."

"Whoa!" Windy cut in. "Quit ridin' around in circles. Who's they? What's got you so riled up?"

"They's the bunch at Sinbad's," Long Jim said. "That cold-faced polecat who deals under the name of Square Shootin' Tripp is the boss. He's the gent who's been masquerading as Coronado's ghost."

He walked to the chair where his bag lay unrolled and picked up his Colt. "Lost my other when they shot me," he explained. He slid the gun into his holster and checked the pull of it. Juan was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Guess it was my fault to begin with,"

Long Jim said. "I was in Celeste a day too soon an' didn't know what to do with myself. I heard about this here ghost that rode out of the old presidio, so I collared Juan here an' rode up for a look. Some polecat took a shot at me.

"When I came to, I was down in the cellar under the fort. I couldn't help hear them talk. They tied me up like a hog an' left a man to guard me. Tripp was waitin' for the U.S. Marshal to show up before turnin' me loose an' plantin' a slug in my back.

"The lawman would find me an' he was expected to put two and two together an' go back home with the case nicely settled. Only he forgot Juan. The kid came back this mornin', an' slugged the man they had guardin' me. We was gettin' ready to leave when you showed up. I didn't get a good look at you before Juan took his pot-shot."

Windy was burning. "Well, what are we waitin' for? Let's brace the polecats—"

"Hold it!" Long Jim said quietly. "There's over a dozen hard-cases holed up in Sinbad's. Some of 'em are pretty good with a gun, too. We can't just walk in there an' start shootin'."

"You got a better idea?" Windy snapped.

"Sure. Why do you think I lugged this piece of tin plate along for? Found it in an old armament room under the fort. I left the sword an' helmet outside. Figgered I might make too much noise gettin' in here for my Colt."

Windy sat down on the bed. "All right, Jim. I'm listenin'."

A half hour later Windy blew out the light and went out. Juan and Long Jim had already gone, slipping out through the window. Windy walked down into the lobby. One-eyed Crowley was sitting behind his desk, his feet propped up on the counter. He eyed Windy.

"Can't sleep," Windy exclaimed. "Guess I'll take a pasear around town. The night air might be good for me."

Crowley grunted. "Yo're loco!"

Windy grinned and strolled out. He remained in the entrance to the alley, ostensibly looking down the dark street. It was just past ten. He saw Long Jim lead his roan out of the barn and turn toward the shelter of the Rio Ajoita. Juan was fading across the back lots.

Windy began to whistle through his teeth as he strolled toward Texas Square.

CHAPTER THREE

Ruckus at Robbers' Roost

TIM McCutcheon was not a very patient man. He had an Irish temper and a strong man's directness and he did not easily hold himself in check. He listened to Blake.

"It's easy to ride off half-cocked," the marshal was saying. "You've got ten men ridin' for you an' they're spoilin' for a fight. You could ride into the Mexican quarter an' cut loose. But you're not sure the man you want is a Mex. Besides, one man can hardly run off all those cows."

McCutcheon got to his feet with an exasperated grunt. They were on the Bar M's darkened front porch. The night was warm and they preferred to risk the mosquitoes than to suffer the heat indoors.

"I ain't sayin' he's alone when he raids us," Tim snapped. "We've got Bar M cows strung out on grass from here to the San Andres. He makes a quick night raid and is across the river before we know the cows are gone. Damn it, Blake, I'll blow up if this keeps on. I can't just sit here an' watch my cows vanish across the Rio Grande!"

Blake shrugged. "Shootin' up Celeste will get you nowhere. Unless you know who you're shootin'. All you've got is a suspicion the raiders are from Celeste. It'll take more than guesswork to clean

house properly. You've got to have proof."

McCutcheon snorted.

"Hold off a while," the marshal continued. "I'll ride into Celeste an' do some—"

The bullet slammed into the side of the house like a screaming hornet. The second smashed a window. The third chipped 'dobe from the roof corner.

The marshal and McCutcheon hit the porch flood simultaneously. McCutcheon's voice was an astonished bellow. "Why, the impudent son!"

The man doing the shooting was outlined against the night sky on a rise about three hundred yards from the ranchhouse —a tall man in crested helmet and chest armor.

Men spilled out of the bunkhouse and almost immediately scrambled back inside as the rifle slammed lead over their heads. For a full five minutes the man in armor terrorized the Bar M. Then, without haste, he turned off the rise and vanished.

The marshal raised no restraining voice as McCutcheon bellowed orders. Minutes later they hit saddle, a dozen strong, and thundered up the rise in pursuit of the rider heading toward Celeste.

Windy killed time waiting for Long Jim. He wandered into the Longhorn Bar across from Sinbad's. A few customers lounged at the rail. It was the same at the two other saloons. The men with known records had evidently faded across the river with the arrival of the U.S. Marshal.

It was well after midnight when Windy walked into Sinbad's. The casual customers had drifted out by this time, leaving only the hard-faced men who made up the Sinbad crowd.

Windy walked to the bar. A sudden silence blanketed the big saloon. Square Shooting Tripp was nowhere in sight.

Windy breasted the starboard side of the bar. He had a lump over his right eye, but this did not keep him from seeing Sinbad glance toward his office and nod to the man standing by it.

Windy waited. Sinbad came over to him, smiling a false welcome. "Glad to see you around, Harris. Find yore partner?"

Harris shook his head. He watched Sinbad pour his drink. The Roc came down from his perch, sidled up to Windy, took a close look at the oldster, and retreated. He ducked his head and gave Windy an under-the-wing look. "Pipe the Captain aboard!" he screamed. "Salute the colors! There's foul weather ahead!"

Windy slid his glass to the Roc. The parakeet glanced at him with beady-eyed suspicion. Then he dipped his beak and sipped the amber liquid thirstily.

Windy shook his head in mock piety. He asked for another glass and waited for Sinbad to join him.

"Let's drink to Long Jim," Windy said. "May his bones rest in peace."

Sinbad lifted his glass and glanced toward his office. Tripp was just coming out. He looked relieved. He owned the saloon, but Tripp did the thinking.

TRIPP came slowly across the room. The others were quiet and watchful, waiting for his move. Harris had his back to them, oblivious to the gathering tension.

Somewhere down the street a running horse pulled up sharply. Then there was quiet. A cat meowed angrily under one of the saloon's open windows.

"Hello, pop," Tripp greeted thinly. "You come to ask those questions?"

Windy turned. The gambler had stopped a few paces from the bar. His long coat hung open, revealing a checkered waistcoat and a heavy gold watch chain. To Windy's practiced eye the coat did not entirely conceal a small shoulder holster.

He dropped all pretense now. The cat yeowl under the window had been Juan's

signal, and there was no longer need for stalling.

He faded back along the jutting prowl, getting Sinbad into view and partially hiding himself from the others in the room. There was no one at his back.

"No," he said to Tripp. "I'm through askin' questions. I'm ready to give the answers."

Tripp sneered.

"In about another minnit," Windy said quietly, "McCutcheon's crew will be bustin' in here for a gun cleanup. An' this time the law will be with him—the marshal from Laredo."

Tripp's sneer froze on his face. "You're crazy!" he rasped. "Why would the Bar M come here?"

Windy grinned. "Look behind you, Tripp. There's yore answer. The man you had expected to dummy for you when the marshal showed up."

No one had noticed Long Jim come in. He stood in the open back doorway, the crested helmet askew on his head, a rusted sword in his left hand.

Out in the night sounded the thunder of hoofs.

"That's McCutcheon an' his men," Windy said. "Any more questions, Tripp?"

"Sure," Tripp snarled. "This one!" He jerked sidewise and reached for his shoulder gun in one lightning move.

Windy killed him with his first shot. He wheeled around, cutting up at Sinbad as Tripp collapsed.

Sinbad had ducked behind the solid plank bar. Harris swung up over the counter. A slug grooved the wood under his arm a split second before he dropped behind the bar. He came down astraddle Sinbad who was crawling swiftly for a trap door in the rear. The saloon owner reared up and Windy slammed his Colt down hard across the ex-sailor's head. Sinbad sprawled on his face.

Windy crouched and peered over the counter. Long Jim, according to plan, had ducked outside, slamming the door.

The others were piling for the front door. They recoiled almost immediately as McCutcheon and his punchers, backed by Marshal Blake, swung out of saddle in front of the saloon.

The cornered men made the mistake of firing a few hasty shots at the Bar M riders. McCutcheon gave a whoop of delight. "Let's clean house, boys!"

Windy grinned. He crawled swiftly to the trap door, quietly raised it, and dropped down into the liquor cellar.

He stopped long enough to pick out a bottle of choice rye whiskey and made his way to the bolted rear door.

"Jim!" Windy whispered sharply, and the tall shadow whirled.

"Windy!" There was relief in Long Jim's voice.

"Come on!" Harris chuckled. "Let's get out of here!"

Chuckling softly they faded into the night.

THEY came unhurriedly down the stairs in Crowley's and walked to the door. Long Jim had disposed of his armor and sword and they had entered the hotel by way of the blacksmith shop.

Crowley was standing in the doorway.

Crowley pointed wordlessly at Long Jim. Finally his words came. "Where'd you come from?"

"Me?" asked Long Jim innocently. "Why, I've never been away."

Juan met them in the barn.

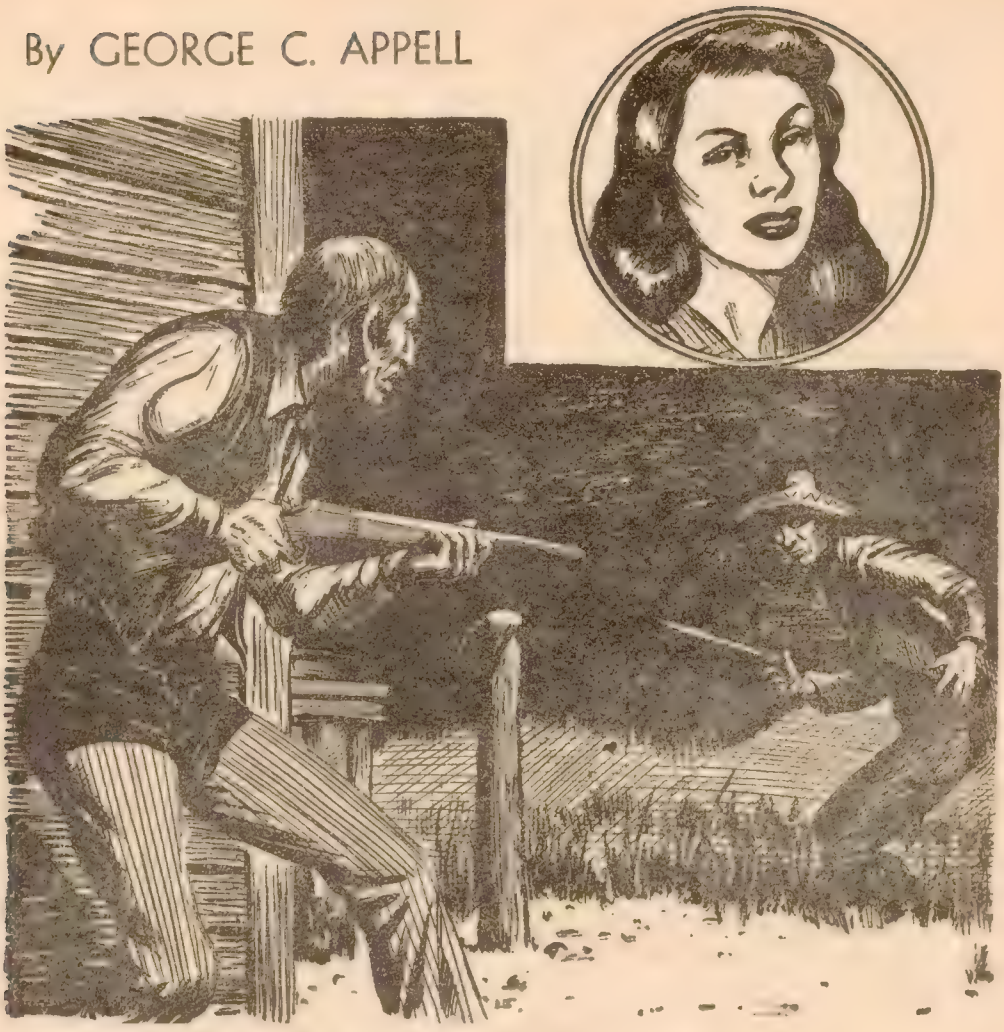
Windy jingled coins in the Mexican youngster's palm. He and Jim mounted.

Crowley was still in his doorway. Windy waved to him. *"Hasta la vista,"* he said sincerely, and Long Jim grinned.

The moon was just lifting over the dark, serrated hills as they hit the trail out of Celeste.

THE END

By GEORGE C. APPELL



I lifted my gun and yelled: "Halt, damn you!"

LAST CHANCE

IT WASN'T long after Henry Woodson had been killed that young Bob Smiley come out from town to the canyon rim, like I knew he would, and he threw off and come walking up to my cabin with his right hand on his gun.

I eased away from the wash basin toward where my rabbit gun rested against the door, cause though Bob was a nice boy and I'd known him since time was, marshals are marshals and likely to get nervous in the doin' of their jobs occasionally.

Not often does a man get a second chance to win a lost stake. . . . But if my rifle shot true—and if I didn't die first—I'd collect tonight on a twenty-year debt, and win back the jack-pot—or another man!

I dropped the towel on the railing and rubbed the remains of my once-fine thatch of hair and I said, "Morning, Bob."

He come up the rest of the way from the hitch post with his hand still on his hip, and it was that quiet you could hear his boots squeak in the sand. Down below, sheer from the cabin, the river rushed southward, but from this height you hardly could hear it.

"Morning, Ben." He hooked his hips over the railing and pulled forth the makings and flipped a brown-paper smoke together. "You always up this early, Ben?" He touched off the smoke with a store match and ticked it at the rabbit gun.

"Only time a man can think." I got into my shirt and buttoned her up. "How's Nancy, Bob?"

He went dark all over and fixed his eyes on the smoke. "I wouldn't know, Ben, I wouldn't know." He let out a breath and shook his head and sighed some more. "Her pop gettin' killed that way, she's different a lot. She wants to know where's the sharp who killed him, an' she won't like me much till I find out."

Henry Woodson was one of them people you'd say never should die. He was quiet and well-behaved and helped what folks he could, and he'd married in town and settled down and had Nancy, and after his wife died a few years back, he give all his time and his heart to that daughter. I know, because I seen him doing it, and everyone else did too.

Then one day he was standing at the bank window, waiting for the express wagon to haul some money East, and this sharp comes in and makes a play for it. Henry tries to tackle him and the sharp lets go two shots and snuffs the life out of Henry. But that money was still in them sacks, a little bloody from where Henry lay over them, but still there. And the sharp lined out of town and was seen no more.

Bob rubbed out his smoke and swung his legs off the rail and shoved his hat back. He looked like a man who'd suddenly decided to do something he didn't want to do, and I held a hunch I knew what it was. Old folks ain't so stupid as you may think.

"Ben, can I see your gun?"

I REACHED over to the door and handed him my gun. He kept looking at me for a minute, like he wanted to apologize, then he opened the breech and drew the bolt and raised the barrel up against the sky and squinted down the bore. He wiggled it this way and that, and then he fingered the bolt a minute. He shook his head once, put the piece together and gave me back my gun.

"All right, Ben." He pushed his hat straight. "This is routine, you see? We got a part-way description of who killed Henry. That description don't answer to you, but we got to check everything."

"I understand, Bob." I understood a lot more than I was telling him, too. I knew that Henry Woodson had never talked much about me, and I'd never mentioned him unless I had to. And the reason for that was Eleanor, Nancy's mother. Even though she'd been dead these years, she still walked between Henry and me and she always would. Henry married her and I didn't.

"Bob, how did this sharp look?"

Bob thought. "Well—lanky, sort of, and long black hair, with a big nose. Ol' Pulver, who was sweepin' out the bank in back at the time, was the only one saw him. Had a big nose, Pulver said."

"That sounds like a lot of folks between Montana and Mexico, Bob. You got to do better'n that."

He was turning to go, but he looked back at me and made a sick face. "They gonna lift my badge, Ben, if I don't find him."

"Uh-huh." And if they lifted his badge, he'd not only be workless, he'd be plumb

unwanted. That included Nancy, too, and in a way you couldn't blame her. With the new grass still growing on her father's grave, naturally she'd look to Bob to straighten things out. They was supposed to be married that month.

I emptied the wash basin and watched the bubbles soak into the sand. "Bob," I said, "where do you think this sharp got to?"

"Not far." Bob shoved his hat back again and chewed down on his lower lip. "He was wearin' blue jeans and a black shirt. He'd have to find a change to get far. And he's a stranger, which means he's got to eat to get back where he come from."

"You felt around here for strangers?"

Bob hauled up his elbow, like he planned to smack me. "I deppitized Pulver, for what he's worth, and we been talking to everybody. No one's seen hide nor brand of him."

I watched Bob ride away from the canyon, his reins hanging loose, and I knew he was far gone in a tangle of thoughts and that the thoughts were roping him to a standstill. You don't get engaged to a girl like Nancy Woodson often, so if you lose her just a few feet from the church, you feel mighty unhappy.

I took my gun and walked past the hitchpost to the canyon rim and sat down pretending to look for a rabbit. I was sad for Nancy, and if a rabbit had flopped right in front of me then, I wouldn't have looked up.

Nancy was so like her mother that they might have been poured from the same mold—deep, bright eyes and light brown hair combed up into little heaps, and a quick laugh that made you think of a creek chuckling down a hill. Nancy was so like her mother that she could have fitted right into that coat I'd brought back. The one I'd brought for Eleanor, as kind of a wedding gift. But when she married Henry, I put it away and left it out of sight.

THAT was a long time ago—not so long in years as long in memory. When you think of a thing thousands of times, you put it behind everything else and it becomes something all by its own, not connected much with anything else. And pretty soon you think of it as being the first thing you ever remembered.

It was that way with Eleanor and me, and the time I decided to go away south and make some money in Mexican mines and then come back and settle down. Eleanor never wanted me to go, and she said so, but I was young and quick and hard, and there was El Dorado almost in reach.

We were sitting on the top step of her father's front porch with the ice-cream grinder between us, and she was laughing cause I'd got too much salt in the ice. I told her if she'd be patient, she'd have the finest ice-cream in all the country.

She stopped laughing and said, quiet-like, "Ben, I don't want to be patient."

I said, "Well, I'll get some more ice an' flavor, an' that'll make up for too much salt." I rolled my cuffs up to the sleeve bands and reached for the grinder to take it around to the springhouse.

"Ben?"

I looked fast at her. She was all full of me, and her soft eyes showed it and her mouth was trying to tell me.

"Eleanor." I felt about as foolish as a man can feel. "I'm sorry. About bein' patient. I didn't—"

"Understand?" She drew a little finger down my bare arm and dropped her eyes and squeezed her arms to her sides, and I thought she was going to cry. "I guess—you never will, Ben." She commenced crying a little.

I stood up and tried to say something. I tried and I couldn't because everything I had to say to her would have sounded as foolish as I felt. I wanted to tell her:

"Eleanor, I want to marry you more'n I want to do anything, ever, only right now,

honey, you'd have to live over a feed store an' do all your work. Maybe you think you want to do it, but you'll find out you don't. You're too sweet to break down to a washtub drudge. I got to get some money—lots of it—before we get married."

Those were the things I wanted to tell her, but they all stuck in my throat and nothing came out but a choke. The only way I could let her know how I felt was to announce what I was going to do.

I said, "Eleanor, I'm goin' down-river soon, an' I'll be back with things for you—lots of things. You wait, hear? We'll have a wedding like this town's never seen! Isn't that better, honey?"

She looked up, but she wasn't looking at me. I followed her eyes down the path and saw the newcomer to town standing at the gate. He lifted off his hat and grinned and asked could he come in.

Eleanor sniffed and smiled a little and nodded, though she didn't seem too happy. "Please do, Mr. Woodson." She raised her eyes. "You know Mr. Woodson, Ben? He's with the bank they've just started."

I picked up the grinder and went back to the springhouse for more ice.

Old folks ain't so stupid as you may think, but lots of young ones are.

I hefted the rabbit gun and stared down into the canyon and watched the river sliding south. It was the same river I'd gone down that day in a bullboat, all hot sand and ginger, headed for El Dorado.

I stood up suddenly and felt my years ache down my legs. I hated that river, and I did then what I'd done before: I spit in it. It was a mighty small act, but it was all I could do to tell that river what I thought of it.

AND as I stood there, I thought I saw something strange in the haze below. Something different, that hadn't been there before. I leaned over and half-shut my eyes and tried to figure it out. Someone called my name from right behind me and I jumped around and almost knocked Nancy Woodson down.

"If you're that nervous," she told me, "you shouldn't stand so close to the edge." She was wearing one of them riding outfits and she looked—well, she looked fine.

"Shouldn't come scarin' an old man," I huffed. We ambled back to the cabin and I put my arm around her, like I always do, but she stiffened a bit and pulled away. I must have seemed surprised.

"Ben." She stood by the railing with her small boots tight together and her hands at her sides. "Was Bob Smiley here today?"

"Which he sure was, Nancy girl." I tilted my head and looked deep into her eyes and they looked just like her mother's had that time she told me I'd never understand. So I hauled in a breath and said, "Nancy girl, he's a right enough fella, Bob is. An' he's pluggin' to bring in this—this—" There I was, trying to make words sound right.

"This man who killed dad. Is that what you wanted to say?"

I went heavy all over. "Yes, Nancy. That's what I wanted to say."

She run her fingers back through her hair and some of it spilled over the scarf she had tied under her chin. Her voice was ragged and tired when she said, "I don't think Bob can do it."

"No?" I braced the gun against the railing and started filling my pipe. "Why not?"

She shook her head once or twice. "I don't know, Ben." She looked up at me and her eyes were steady as sights. "He thought—he thought maybe—you'd done it, Ben."

I lit my pipe and winked through the smoke at her. "That makes him a good marshal, hey? Coverin' all possibilities?"

She shook her head again. "Ben—he's got to find this man. Do you hear?" And

then she was popping her fists on my chest and shouting, "He's *got* to—he's *got* to! Do you hear?"

I grabbed her fists and shoved them down and watched her till she breathed quiet again. "All right, Nancy girl. He will, he will. You won't take him less he does—that it?"

She nodded. "I—can't—unless he does." He eyes were on mine. "Ben—can you help him? Isn't there something you can do?"

Just like her mother, she was. Just like her mother, true to the man she loved and wanting him to perform, to act right. Eleanor had wanted me to perform, once. I hadn't.

"I'll help, o' course I'll help." Sometimes, things don't come too late. Sometimes a man gets a second chance at something he's lost.

Nancy took her reins and tried to smile at me, but it wasn't much of a smile. I held out my hand to her, but she swung to her saddle without help. "I'm sorry, Ben, about making this fuss." She found her stirrups and her boot-toes disappeared. "He's got to make it good, you know that. He'll be through in this town if he doesn't."

I started cleaning my gun after she'd gone, cause I never knew when I could use it. These rabbits'll run right across your lap, out here, and you got to be ready. We have wolves, too, big gray ones with eyes like globes, and they got to be shot off. In all my time out here I've seen thousands of 'em, I guess, and rare it is when you get a second chance at a wolf, so you got to be ready with the gun. Ready, and sure.

I mind one big scraggly he, who come out of the hills and commenced killing sheep right fast, and we hunted for days for that big one. At last we found him holed up near the herds, where nobody'd ever looked for him, cause that's where we least expected to find him.

SO I BEGAN to put little squares together in my head to make one big square, and all across my mind was a lean face with a big nose and long black hair on top. I wondered how a man like that could eat and find a disguise in open country like ours, where a stranger is cause for talk.

I thought about that wolf again, and after a bit I finished cleaning my gun, and I went inside the cabin and opened a wall panel. There it was, good as the day I bought it.

I lifted it out and hung it on a nail and stroked its silver fringes, though they'd faded and tarnished some. And I felt of the sleeves, made of thin, worked-over kinkajou hide, and I rubbed the silver buckle and scratched at the jewels set into the thin waist. They didn't shine any more and the belt settings weren't much to look at.

But it was the same coat, and there was a hat to go with it. A roll-brimmed sombrero with a jeweled band—only the jewels were dull now, like the ones in the belt.

I'd bought this coat and the hat for her the week before I left Mexico. All the way up-river I kept it tucked tight in my gear, because on the river them days, and even now sometimes, you didn't proclaim your material wealth.

And I got to town and walked right up the street where she lived and reached the gate and stood, a minute, looking up the path to the porch where two years before we'd sat trying to make ice cream. And I remembered how I'd stormed off to the springhouse when Henry Woodson showed up, and I thought, What a fool thing to do, wasn't it, now?

I went up the path with the coat and sombrero under my arm, trying to figure how she'd like these things I'd brought her. We'd have the biggest wedding the town had ever seen! Course, she might have been put out with me for staying

away so long, and not writing for months, but I hadn't heard from her for months either, so it was even, in my mind.

I knocked on the glass door and took off my hat and got ready to bow. I had the thing all rehearsed in my mind, and when the door clicked back, I bent over and held out the wedding coat and said, "Your servant, ma'am."

"What are you selling?"

I came straight in a hurry and found myself facing Eleanor's father. "Pardon, sir."

He twisted his face and blinked through the shadow of the porch. "Oh-h. You're Ben—Ben—the feed store felluh."

"That's right, only I changed my line. I'm goin' to buy a ranch out by the canyon, an' your daughter's goin' to share it with me." I jiggled the coat in front of him. "Is she home now?"

He kept blinking at me for a minute, then waved his pipestem toward the street. "Two blocks over. Cottonwood Lane, Number Twelve. Ask for Mrs. Woodson."

I never did go to 12 Cottonwood Lane or to any other address in town. I kept moving and left the streets behind and wickiupped near where the cabin is now, and the few times I saw Eleanor after that were from a distance, and it seemed to me that either she or I planned the distance.

I guess she didn't want to bring the whole thing up again any more'n I did. Anyway, I heard she was happy enough, and when she had Nancy, she'd let her play out toward the canyon with the other kids in town, knowing full well they'd find the cabin. That's how I got to know Nancy, and I used to think—late at night when the moon was high and I was all alone under it—maybe that was Eleanor's way of offering just a little bit of herself.

I CARRIED the coat outside the cabin and hung it on the railing and flopped the sombrero on top of it, and then I took my gun and paced off across the prairie where it fell away into the canyon. I took a hipshot at some sage, just to make noise, and re-loaded and fired again.

I trotted, after the second shot, though my wind's short now and running makes my heart come hard. I trotted most a mile, then fired a third time. After that one, I rested a minute, letting my lungs hang even, and then I started back toward the cabin.

It was getting amber in the air and the sun was going down, and pretty soon, I knew, I'd bag me a rabbit or two. One'd be enough, but two could do more for me. I moved quietly, and the wrinkles in the prairie went purple with twilight. Way east I could see the last daylight layin' lazy on the buildings of the town, makin' them yellow like gold.

Half a mile from my cabin, I flushed a jack and spun him with one shot. That's pretty good for an old fella, I thought, and with the light dim. Near a hundred yards further on, I flushed two jacks and slammed the closest. So I had my two rabbits, and I tied 'em to a railpost near the coat, and then I went through the dusk to the canyon rim to have a look at that river down below.

I could barely see it in the last light, but that didn't matter. I saw something else. Something I'd seen that morning and couldn't understand. The thing I was trying to figure out when Nancy girl come up behind me that way.

I pulled back in the darkness, not hating the river so much any more for taking me away on it, and hoping to myself that it might give me something back. I turned up the lamp in the cabin and opened some air-tights and had a slow, cold supper. Then I blew out the lamp and sat all peaceful in the doorway, with my gun to hand should I get a shot at anything. By an' by the stars come out and they was that close, you could pick 'em off the sky with your fingers.

It must have been midnight when I heard something over by the rim. A squeaky sound, it was, like boots in the sand. I held by breath high in my throat, thinking if you can catch a wolf once, you can do it again. And this wolf, who had to eat but couldn't make any noise about it, come creeping past the hitch post and stopped, listening.

The starlight showed him to be lean-limbed and long-haired and big-nosed, and after a bit he crept up to the cabin and eyed them two rabbits. In another second he had 'em under one arm, and then his eyes hit the coat. I could hear him breathing from his climb up the canyon, and he looked all around before he took the coat. He tried it on, and it fit, and then he took the sombrero and put that on. He stayed a minute more, raised on the balls of his feet, listening, then he crept away toward the rim, faster than he'd come. I could barely see him anymore.

That was when I took my gun and hollered: "Halt!"

He whipped around and fired and the shot went through the roof, but my shot went through him. I dragged him into the cabin and laid him out and peeled off that coat, first, before I went back for the sombrero. His black shirt was still damp from the washing he'd given it.

Bob Smiley got there before moon-rise and come in with his gun loose and ready to use. "Heard firin' out here, Ben," he informed me. Then he saw what I had on the floor, and I told him I didn't mind a man takin' my rabbits, which this man had heard me shoot, but when he took my wedding presents, I got mad.

"Your what?" Bob bent over the killer sharp, nodding and looking satisfied.

"A present for Nancy—though a long time comin'. This sharp might've gotten across the border, dressed in these. An' I reckon—marshal—that the killin' is legal, since it was in defense of household goods like jewelry."

All Bob could say was nothing, so I told him I'd seen the black shirt dryin' in the canyon, and reckoned its owner was holed-up close like a wolf I'd bagged once, and that he needed grub and a change of clothes.

"There's a lot of El Dorado in that coat, Bob, and it's all for Nancy girl. But I got a present for you, an' it's this-here what's on the floor. You tell folks this: you heard shootin' an' come out here an' dropped this fella commitin' theft. Bob, if you don't claim that, I won't give the coat to Nancy girl."

He kept on saying nothing, so I started to make a jack-stew, meanwhile warnin' him to take my offer, cause it ain't often a man gets a second chance, and young folks frequently don't recognize the first one.

INSURE YOUR FUTURE

BUY U. S. BONDS

By WILLIAM R. COX

A piece of hot lead tore through his neckerchief, but he lifted the Winchester anyway.

A Guest Bearing Guns

Who was this silent stranger known only as Bucky, who came to Piute in a cloud of dust—to kill a murderer he'd never seen, and die for an hombre whose very guts he hated?

BUCKY wasn't old and he wasn't young. He rode into Piute on a fine chestnut horse. His hat was creamy-clean and stiff-brimmed, a Stetson; his boots were stitched and polished and expensive. He rode a center-fire, full-stamped saddle with bearskin side-pockets

and his chaperejos were of the same skin. His spurs and bit were silver inlaid. He wore buckskin pants, foxed with antelope.

Bucky's single gun was a .45 Colt, silverplated, with a pearl handle. It hung low on his lean flank, in an open, worn holster. His hands were brown and hard, cowboy's hands, and his reata was a working rope, hung to his saddle. He rode loose but erect, a paradoxical trick known only to the elite of his world.

Bucky dismounted in front of the Ace Bar and tethered his horse. He tipped back the brim of his hat and looked up and down Main Street, a dusty thoroughfare splitting the cowtown endways, east and west. He had come up from the south, but he showed no sign of hard usage.

He walked across the boards in heels higher than most folks would wear; his was the gait of a man who rode across the street for the makin's, rather than to walk ten steps. He saw only a wide, ordinary, cow-town street, deserted now, before noon. He went into the Ace Bar.

There was only one customer in the dim coolness of the place. Pappy Gill had a bottle before him and was orating to the bartender, a man called Brownie. Neither was known to Bucky. No one in Piute was known to him then.

Pappy Gill took a long, searching look at Bucky. Then he said, "Purty Shadow, huh? Have a smile, stranger. Liable t' be a thirsty day if yuh are hereabouts when the ball opens."

Bucky said, "Thanks." He stood at the far end of the bar, where he could watch the door. He poured his drink—not too much, not too little. His movements were painstakingly careful, yet seemingly careless, as of a man who knows the correct thing to do and means to do it.

PAPPY GILL was well into the bottle. He said, "Sometimes Pretty Shadow boys is hiyu riders. Sometimes they spend too much time surveyin' the shadow. Get so they hate a cloudy day." He addressed himself to Brownie, a fat man with a cowlick. "Waal, 'tain't important, t'day. I tell yuh, Brownie, I plumb hate t' see it. Ralph Beever's a fine young man, got himself a fine wife. Worked hard, paid all his bills. Got a nice spread. *Too* nice."

The bartender grunted, "He shouldn't o' moved in on the water hole."

" 'Tain't John Nix's water hole," said Pappy Gill. " 'Tain't nobody's water hole. Nix jest used it. Ralph Beever hadda have water when his herd grew. I seen this comin' four years ago, when Beever fust showed he had gumption and could build a spread. It's a plumb shame, in my opinion."

"He's a dead man," said Brownie. "His wife's a widder."

Pappy Gill took another drink and shook his head. "The hull hell of it is, yer prob'ly keerect. John Nix is bad enough. But his man Baxter is plumb pizen. And he's got two others now. New men. Guns tied low. Walkin' around with slit-eyes. Cat-men. Seed a-plenty of 'em in my day. Hardin, Thompson, Hickok. Cat-men, allus ready. John Nix intends t' rule. He's a rulin' man an' I ain't sayin' he ain't a big man. But a man that's got to be master."

Brownie said, "He's broke three-four good men. The nester, Clarke. Charley Downing. Pet Kiley. Run 'em clean outa the country. He'll have t' kill Beever, though. Beever ain't got sense enough t' run."

Pappy Gill said, "Humph. Sense enough! Humph. Easy t' see why you're a barkeep. Allus will be one. Ralph Beever's got too much sand t' run."

"He's scairt, I tell yuh," said Brownie. "I seen him turn color when Nix ordered him off the water hole last week. White as a sheet, he was."

"That ain't no sign of a duck's nest," said Pappy Gill. "He's got sand. He'll be

in town today. Yuh'll see. Yuh'll see."

"He'll git kilt, then," said Brownie.

Again the old man shook his head. "Yep. He'll get kilt."

"Baxter'll do it. Nix'll never draw," said Brownie. "Nix is too big to do his own killin' any more."

"Yep. Baxter—or one of the cat-men." Pappy Gill took another drink, wiped his flowing white mustache and glanced at Bucky. "Beever ain't no gunman. And he ain't got no hired guns. On'y Mex vaqueros, good cowboys, but no guns."

There was a little pause, as though the two politely waited for Bucky to join the conversation. He said, "Have one on me, gents."

They all drank. Pappy Gill said, "This here's like a wake. I allus liked Beever. Mary Beever, she's a cute li'l angel. Helped my grandchild when it was sick. Never forget her. Wonder what she'll do? Sell to Nix, I reckon."

"That's what Nix wants," said Brownie. "He's got to be master. He wants it all."

"It ain't purty," said Pappy. "But it's the West, way she's run now, with the law meanin' dumb little. Whale swallers minnow."

Bucky sipped his drink. The whiskey was good. Piute seemed a good town. Pappy Gill was a type he recognized at once, a privileged town character, as good as any newspaper in spreading the tidings of the day. Brownie was the philosophic bartender. Piute would be all right—for a spell.

Bucky said, "You say Ralph Beever'll be in town?"

"He'll be in," said Pappy Gill.

"You know Beever?" asked Brownie. "If he's a friend of yourn, you better ride out and tell him *not* to come into town."

"He'll be in," said Pappy Gill. "He's got sand."

Bucky nodded. He said pleasantly, "Ralph's got sand, all right. But he cain't fight three-four gunmen. No man can."

"Nix sent for him. He'll be in," said Pappy. He sighed.

Brownie said, "If you are a friend of his'n—Say! He didn't send fer yuh, stranger, did he?"

Bucky weighed the implication of the question. He said, "No. Ralph don't know I'm around. I'd admire if you gents didn't mention it, neither. And thank yuh for the whiskey an' the fine conversation. *Hasta manana!*" He bowed and walked out of the bar.

Brownie said, "Huh! Purty Shadow. How could we mention it that he was here? He didn't tell us his monicker!"

Pappy Gill took another drink. "Ye'll allus be a barkeep. No brains. S'pose you jest nach'ly dee-scribed Pretty Shadow? A blind man'd remember him, once he seen him."

THERE was a bank in Piute, and a stagecoach station. There was a blacksmith shop and a general store and two other barooms. But the Ace Bar was the main place, Bucky knew. He walked around the town in the hot sun, sweating a little, but moving slow, memorizing the town. He limped back to his horse and leaned against the chestnut's withers, stroking the silken hide of the fine animal.

It was noon when John Nix rode in. He was a big man with a red face, a man who never got tanned, but sunburned, peeled and burned again. He had greenish, slanted eyes and a couple of deep hash marks alongside his large mouth. He was a sandy-haired man, with hair on his hands and chest and legs and a hard way of staring from under shaggy, heavy brows.

Baxter was a lean hound of a man with a hound's face. Bucky almost expected that Baxter's ears would droop if a kind person stroked him. He did not look like a dangerous man, but he wore two guns, tied down with buckskin. He had

a nervous habit of plucking at his cartridge belt and upon closer examination, his brown eyes were shallow and a bit distended. Baxter, Bucky knew, was a killer. It meant little to Baxter to kill a man—he had done it before. Bucky could tell about men like Baxter.

The two cat-men were ordinary, young gun-slingers. Dangerous as lunatics, they would throw lead just to hear their guns go off, Bucky thought. They had a way of sidling, watching both ways when they walked across the boards to the Ace Bar behind the big owner of Antler Ranch. Pappy had been right, they were cat-eyed.

They were four rough men. Nix dominated the others like a lion among coyotes, but Nix was the kind of man who made coyotes perform like catamounts. Working for a man like Nix, on a big spread like Antler, gave a cowboy a feeling of greatness, of being a part of empire. Antler men ruled the roost because Nix was the master of everything he wanted. Everyone not connected with Antler had to be slave or sycophant. Bucky knew about that.

It was a day of empire, of bigness for the sake of size. Men boasted of not being able to ride over their domains in a day, two days. Cattle roamed, not yet fenced, over thousands of acres of land which no one thought to improve or protect for another day. John Nix ruled the Piute country like a feudal baron.

Bucky walked around his horse. Nix had not seen him standing there. He hobbled across the street on his high heels and went into the store. There were two windows in front of the store and he could see every which-way while he lounged on the counter. As he lounged there he kept his eyes open.

Pappy Gill, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, said, "You seen 'em. You seen the hard bunch from Antler. What you think of 'em?" Pappy was behind the counter. He owned the store, it seemed.

Bucky said, "I'd like a can o' peaches. The halves, not the sliced."

"Four bits for the halves," said Pappy, producing a large can. "Want it opened? Nix and his coots, waitin' fer Ralph Beever. An' Ralph'll come in."

Bucky helped himself to a wooden spoon from the pickle jar, wiped it on an immaculate handkerchief and dipped into the peaches. "Fruit sure is good when a man's been on the trail awhile," he remarked.

"Thet li'l Mary Beever," said Pappy. "Purty as a speckled puppy. An' one li'l yearlin'. Jest a nice Western fambly gettin' started. Ranchhouse as clean an' neat as a Chinese laundry. Ralph Beever done mighty good—till he tried to move in on the water hole."

"Gove'ment hole?" asked Bucky. He knew it was, or Ralph wouldn't have moved in on it.

Pappy said, "Nach'ly. But Nix is big. He's master."

Bucky ate the peaches. The Ace Bar was ominously quiet. There was no horseplay by the young cowboys with the guns and the cat eyes. Up and down Main Street a few people ventured out. But they moved quickly through the dust and got out of sight as soon as their business was finished.

Bucky said, "Everybody knows about this shoot-out thet is a-comin' off. You'd think someone'd try to stop it. Help Ralph Beever."

"Anyone'd help Mary Beever," said Pappy. "But goin' agin Nix, thet's a hoss from a different stable."

"People don't cotton to Ralph like they do Mary?" Bucky choked a bit on the peaches and put the can down, not quite finished.

"Ralph's quiet. Big, powerful an' quiet. But you know him. . . ." Pappy's eyes were bright and inquisitive.

"I know him," said Bucky quietly. "I know him good."

"Then you know he'll come in."

"He'll come in, if he was sent for," said Bucky.

"Thet is what I said." Pappy grabbed at his mustache, scowling. "He's got sand, but he ain't smart."

"No. He ain't very smart," said Bucky. "He's wise. But he ain't clever."

"Ahh," said Pappy. "Yuh are a man what has lived, I see, Purty Shadow."

"No. I ain't lived. But I've noticed things. And people." He stared across at the Ace Bar. The place was too quiet. Even under the circumstances the cowboys should be orating, and their voices would carry on the still air, so that he could hear them. It wasn't natural.

AS IF divining his thought, Pappy said, "John Nix don't like no nonsense around him. People got to keep quiet until spoken to, like chillun, around John Nix. He's a mighty big man. He runs things."

"I gather that," said Bucky.

He was listening to sounds Pappy Gill did not hear. He moved at the counter and his lean length tensed. Somewhere a horse moved softly, then stopped. Bucky's ears tingled. There was a slithering step in the rear of the long store. Pappy turned, his mustaches bristling.

Bucky stood straddle-legged, and somehow the ornate silver-plated Colt was in his hand. He said, "Waal, Ralph."

The wide-shouldered man stood staring, his mouth twisted. "Bucky!"

He wore range clothing weathered and mended, but clean and ironed. His hatbrim was floppy. He had a pleasant, open face and a stubborn jaw. He was tanned to the bone and his hands were horny and strong. He carried a shotgun in trail position. He made no move to lift the gun, nor did Bucky holster his revolver.

Ralph Beever said tonelessly, "Mary knew you'd come."

"Sooner or later. It hadda be," said Bucky harshly.

"Yuh don't have to shoot me, Bucky. There's four men acrost the street'll do the job for yuh."

Pappy Gill said wildly, "Ralph, I thought he was yer friend. I thought—"

"Keep out of it, Pappy." The wide man's voice was dull. "Bucky's got a right. We done him dirt."

There was a small silence as Pappy fought with his mustaches. Then Bucky said, "Out back, Ralph."

"Out back? Are yuh crazy, Bucky? Yuh got me. Go ahead—do what you got to do. I ain't denyin' nothin'. I ain't beggin'. You got a right."

"Out back," said Bucky.

Ralph Beever shook his head and turned, still carrying the shotgun at trail. He was wearing low-heeled town boots. He padded out the way he had come, into the yard behind the store. Pappy Gill staggered, dumbfounded, behind. Bucky turned and said, "Stay in there and watch the Ace. Understand?"

"No," said Pappy. "I don't savvy nothin'." He stayed in the store, irresolute, watching both ways like a worried terrier.

The two men descended the steps onto a cleared space amidst crates and piled boxes. Bucky unbuckled his gun belt and laid it aside. He placed the Colt atop it, naked in the sunlight, glittering. Ralph Beever, moving as if in a dream, put down the shotgun. He wore no other weapon.

Bucky said, "All right. Come on."

He moved stiffly on the high heels. Ralph did not budge. Bucky reached out a hand quick as a striking rattler and slapped Ralph's face. The heavier man flinched, but stood doggedly, hands dangling at his sides. Bucky, his face white, slapped harder, threw a heavy left fist to the belly.

Ralph's middle was like an iron washboard. Bucky hit him again, with all his

might. Ralph shook his head, grunting a little. He said, "I can't fight yuh. Mebbe yuh better shoot me, at that."

"Yuh got a baby," gritted Bucky. "You and Mary got a young un."

"She was yours," Ralph said. "I stole her. When you was away. You was away too often, Bucky. Women, they don't like it fer a man to be fiddle-foot."

"Don't preach, damn it. Fight!" said Bucky. He used some language. He felt the deep hurt coming up, choking him. He said something he should not have said, about Mary.

Ralph Beever turned ghostly white. He hauled back his right fist as though it held a blacksmith's hammer. Bucky beat at his face, cut it. Ralph moved, holding the right fist ready. Bucky cut him and crossed a terrific right to the body. Ralph moved inexorably forward, still pale.

Bucky threw himself on the work-hardened man, flailing with both fists, spending the hatred and hurt of the years with the use of his fists and his strength, uncaring, hurling all of it at once, driving at Ralph Beever the slings and arrows which had been his through the hundreds of long days and nights of his pillory.

RALPH BEEVER unloosed the lightning of his right hand. It was awkward, unskilled, but it was quick and sure. It crashed between Bucky's whirling fists. It thudded upon Bucky's unprotected, reckless lean jaw. It careened him backwards until his knees buckled and he spun, going against the box upon which his gun rested.

He went down, his gaudy clothing dirtied by the dust of Pappy Gill's backyard. He stayed there a moment, one hand holding his torso off the ground, his jaw slack, his head wagging back and forth. From the corner of his mouth a little trickle of blood crept out and dribbled down his chin.

Ralph Beever stood in the center of the cleared space. He said, "The gun is at yore hand. You shouldn't 've said anything about Mary. She—she's good."

Bucky could reach the gun by merely opening and closing his hand. He did so. The feel of the pearl handle was hot and smooth and familiar. He moved his head faster, shaking off the cloud which destroyed his thoughts. He climbed erect, holding the gun.

He dusted himself, watching the little clouds come off the surface of his clothing. He picked up the belt without releasing the Colt and buckled it about his waist, tying down the open bottom of the holster with hands which shook a little.

Bucky said, "All right, Ralph."

"Go out to her," said Ralph. "John Nix is goin' to git me killed. Go to Mary. Take her outa here. Sell the ranch and see that she is all right. You'll do that, won't you, Bucky? You don't hold nothin' agin her, do you?"

"No. I don't hold nothin' agin her."

Ralph Beever was suddenly eager. "Then it ain't so bad. I'm glad you found us, Bucky. I'm glad. It's—it's like God sent yuh. I got myself inta this tight—I didn't think Nix'd really go so far, honest I didn't. Now you kin git Mary and the baby outa it, Bucky."

Bucky said, "You think that?"

"It's my own fault," said Ralph. "I grew too fast. It was for them, Bucky. I got hoggish."

"Bucky said, "It's a gov'ment water hole, ain't it?"

"Yuh don't know Nix." Ralph Beever almost smiled. His bruised face was lopsided from Bucky's blows. "He's more hoggish than me. And he's got the power. An' guns. He's hired guns. I ain't no gun-fighter, Bucky, you know thet."

Bucky said, "Pick up your shotgun, Ralph."

"No!" said Ralph sharply. "You cain't go with me." He grabbed the heavy weapon and turned it on Bucky. "I couldn't

have that. You light a shuck out to the ranch. Mary don't know I come in. She didn't want me to. You tell her. Tell her I couldn't be no slave."

Bucky said, "Stop actin' like me, Ralph. Come on." Ignoring the shotgun as though the other man did not have it in his hands he walked into Pappy Gill's store. He picked up the can containing the remnants of his feast and drained the peach juice. "Fruit sure is good, sometimes."

Ralph came hurrying behind. "Bucky, you know you are wanted. This'll call attention to yuh. The Federal Marshal—"

Bucky said, "He ain't helpin' you none. Law!" He laughèd lightly. He was himself again. He felt cool, calm, cleansed.

Ralph said, "Bucky, I know yuh. Bucky, this here is bad. They got three behind Nix, who is powerful mean and tough himself."

Pappy Gill said shrilly, "Leave him be, Ralph. He knows what he wants t' do. Leave him alone!" He winked hard, gesturing. He had seen Bucky draw when Ralph had entered the store. He jumped up and down. "If I had half a chancet, if I could see better and shoot straighter, by gum—"

"Stay out of this," said Bucky. He was humming a little, looking across the street. He said under his breath. "It won't be no bushwhackin' job. Nix'll want public opinion with him. Nope, it'll be a straight shoot-out. They'll try an' make you start it."

Ralph said, "He sent for me to talk it over."

"Sure. Brownie'd be scared to go agin him, after it was over," said Bucky. "Nobody's gone into the Ace and nobody ain't goin' in there."

Ralph said, "I had to come in. A man can't live—"

Bucky gestured. His every move was graceful and easy now. He said, "Walk across. I'll be around. Let 'em start. Don't do nothin', but keep that shotgun in yore hands. It'll slow 'em down, make 'em think. It was smart to bring a shotgun, Ralph."

"Well, thanks, Bucky," said Ralph, flushing a little. "I ain't—"

"Go on," said Bucky. "Go in there."

HE WAITED until Ralph had firmly walked into the Ace Bar. Then he strolled into the dust of Main Street. He was still humming a little. His cream-colored sombrero was cocked over one eye. He arranged his scarlet rebosa as though he were approaching a party where pretty girls waited. The tune he was humming was a love song he had learned in Mexico.

On the walk before the Ace Bar he paused to flick dust from his boots. He heard the heavy voice of the man within. The timbre of it was familiar, although he did not know John Nix. He had heard men like Nix talk before. He shoved the swinging doors and drifted into the bar.

The two cat-eyed men swung, staring. Then one snorted. The other looked inquiringly at John Nix.

John Nix slid his hard gaze at Bucky and contempt was in his eyes. "Dude, this-here is a private discussion amongst men. Vamos."

Bucky walked past Nix, past Baxter, past the two cat-boys. He backed up to the bar and locked his elbows on the edge. He said, "So you're the big John Nix. You talk and folks jump like a sun-fishin' bronc, do they?"

His voice was soft, but the cat-eyed boys slid apart and Baxter straightened alongside his boss. Ralph stepped sideways, flanking the four of them with the shotgun under his arm. Ralph said, "This is Bucky. He stays."

Nix said, "I see. A sidekick of yourn, eh, Beever?" He snorted. "Okay. If he wants it, he can have it, too."

"Uh-huh. I want it," said Bucky. He

seemed thoroughly relaxed, but Baxter moved uncertainly and looked as though he wanted to say something but did not dare. His shallow eyes shuttled between Bucky and the square-built man with the shotgun. "Go ahead, Nix. Talk. It's cheap—talk."

Nix said, "I'll attend to you, later, stranger. Ralph, I got yuh down here to make one more offer. I'll buy the ranch."

"Or else?" said Ralph quietly.

"I'll run yuh out. I'll make your wife a widow. I'll make yer son fatherless," spat out the big man. "I'll take yer crummy lil spread. I'll *take* it, understand?"

Bucky spoke before Ralph could answer. "Man named Lincoln freed the slaves. Said somethin' about bein' neither slave nor master. Fine way he had o' puttin' things."

"I'm from Texas," roared Nix. "Damn all Yankees!"

"Big talk," nodded Bucky. "We come from down around the Brazos, me and Ralph. Thet don't say we can't understand common decency. Whyn't you share thet water hole, Nix? 'Nuff water, ain't there?"

"There ain't room on this range for me an' Beever," said Nix. He was growing wary, though, Bucky saw. Some of Baxter's nervousness had communicated itself to the blusterer. He was smart. He would give them the signal any moment, now. Bucky's insulting tone was galling him. He would lose all his caution and start the ball when he thought it was safe.

Bucky said, "That's the trouble with men like you. Not enough room for you, not ever."

Nix said, "I didn't come here to bandy words with no dude saddle-bum. I come to make a legitimate offer." His hard eyes swiveled to Brownie, so the barkeep would hear and remember this talk of business done in the open. "Let him take his wife an' brat and move on."

Bucky saw the danger signal in Ralph's face. He said quickly, "Looks to me like you brought your own jury, Nix. Looks to me like this is a showdown. Four men heeled, agin one with a double-barreled shotgun. 'Course Ralph kin cut off a couple of you at the pockets. But you plan to git out o' the way."

He spoke more rapidly, driving the words at Nix as he had driven his fists at Ralph across the street behind Pappy Gill's store. "What you didn't plan was that I'd be here. You'd of cut me down when I come in the door if you'd known about me. Baxter, he's scared right now. He knows it's sure curtains for him. He didn't like it when Ralph come in with the shotgun and now he don't like it nohow. Now he knows I'm throwin' a gun on yuh the minute yuh start somethin', Nix! Start it!" He barked the last two words.

Brownie came out from behind the bar like a scared cat. He went all the way to the back door, then hung there, fascinated. The four men from Antler Ranch were aligned, their guns swinging low. The two who faced them were ten feet apart now. Ralph held the shotgun hip-high, and the sound of the twin hammers being cocked was harsh and dry on the smoke-loaded air of the barroom.

Ralph said, "Yeah, John, Bucky's done tole you. I'm here. You called me in. We're ready if you are. Git it over!"

THERE was a moment when Bucky thought the big man would do it. Nix's neck swelled, his eyes protruded in his rage. If he gave the signal there would be blood to the ankles in the Ace Bar—and some of it would be Nix's. He could not set his men upon Ralph Beever and slide out as action started, not with the steady-eyed stranger watching him. Too late he recognized in the slouching figure what Baxter and the others had seen at once. Here was a dangerous man, laughing at him, unafraid.

For a moment he hesitated, while his

rage simmered. Then he said in a hoarse, strange voice, "I tole yuh I come here to palaver. Yuh have forced this issue yerself, Beever, you and this-here dude. Yuh are makin' a big mistake. This here is war, now. Yuh brought it on yerself."

He turned and walked heavily out of the Ace Bar. His men sidled after him, catprowling, their eyes heavy-lidded. Baxter was the last to leave. Ralph exhaled slowly, a long breath.

He said, "Waal, Bucky. Yuh bluffed 'em."

But Bucky was already in motion. He had Ralph by the arm, dragging him. The two went past Brownie and out the back door like a pair of wraiths.

Bucky said, "Yuh dang fool!" A gun crashed and a bullet whined. "They were jest playin' fer time. Didn't yuh see it in Nix's eyes? Come on!"

He whirled across a back lot. He shoved Ralph up an alley. He had memorized every avenue of the Main Street sector. He flattened against a building, holding Ralph behind him. One of the cowboys came running with a rifle he had taken from his saddle.

Bucky stepped out and said, "Here you are, buffalo boy!" The rifle came around. Bucky had not even drawn. He did so now. He drew and fired, and again he was humming the love tune that dark senorita had taught him. The hired gunman collapsed on the boards.

Bucky walked deliberately into view. He bent and picked up the fallen Winchester. A piece of hot lead tore through his neckerchief. He bowed, lifted the rifle and shot the second gunman down from the back of a horse.

Baxter was holed up. He was shooting around the edge of the smithy, showing himself briefly, merely trying to make a lucky hit. Bucky ignored him. He was searching for Nix.

He saw the big man on the steps of the hotel, throwing a shell into a rifle. Bucky turned and one of Baxter's bullets struck him in the shoulder.

He pitched forward, onto his knee. He touched the trigger of the Winchester. Splinters flew from the edge of the smithy. Baxter moaned with pain and stumbled into view. Bucky shot him through the heart and put down the Winchester. The pain from the shoulder wound made it difficult to handle a long gun.

He got up. He moved sideways as Nix fired his first shot. Ralph came running, and fired one of the shotgun barrels. The range was too long and he may as well have been throwing tin cans. Bucky snarled, "Get back, you fool. It's you he wants worst. You'll do no good. Get back."

Ralph had his head down, running. He was unhurt and in the low-heeled boots he ran faster than Bucky. He got between Bucky and the big man on the hotel steps. It was plain suicide. Bucky tried to hurry and could not.

Nix was wrenching at the rifle as though to tear it apart in his big hands. The mechanism had jammed, Bucky knew at once. He smiled at the small miracle. He walked a few steps farther. He was getting dizzy from the impact of the .45 slug which was in him.

He saw Ralph going straight at the big man, the shotgun held clumsily in his hands. Ralph had never been any good with guns. He was a worker, a canny cowman, a good, solid everyday fellow, but he was never any good with guns.

Bucky now, Bucky had always been handy with weapons. Bucky knew tricks that few others knew. He staggered a bit as Nix triumphed over the rifle and threw the lever to send a cartridge into its chamber. Nix had them both lined up now. Two quick shots and he had Ralph, then Bucky. The hotel seemed a long way down the dusty street.

Bucky leaned against the barber pole. A scared Sicilian gibbered within the

shop, his fat wife and children huddled around him. Bucky winked at them.

HE HAD his Colt in his hand. Ralph, foolish, brave, was lumbering along, trying to get within range where he might have a reasonable chance of hitting Nix. Bucky held the Colt. It was painful to aim. He pointed it upwards. He gauged the wind, the distance. It was a trifle long, but dropping a shot was a risky thing at any time. He cocked the Colt, fired.

His first one was short. He elevated the sight, not hurrying. Nix was raising the gun to shoot Ralph.

Bucky could hold it. Ralph had stolen his girl. He could hold it and Ralph would be dead, then he could shoot Nix. Then he could get Mary. She'd come, if Ralph was gone. She'd go wherever he wanted. He knew it as well as he knew anything.

He pressed back on the hammer, released it. He threw a third shot, a fourth. He let the hammer fall on an empty chamber.

He held onto the barber pole. His head was going around with the red painted stripe. He made himself look.

Ralph had stopped. He was standing, the gun ready, looking at Nix. The big man who had wanted to be master over slaves was falling down the hotel steps. It was an undignified procedure, but Nix was not humiliated by it.

He was dead before he hit the second step.

Ralph turned and ran back. He said, "You're hit. I knew it. Bucky, I woulda killed him. I woulda killed hell outa him!" There were tears raining down the tanned cheeks. "Bucky, it ain't bad, is it?"

"I'm all right, Bud," said Bucky.

He wasn't all right. He sat down alongside the barber pole. Pappy Gill was coming on the run with a tubby man bearing a satchel. That would be the doctor. Ralph was kneeling alongside him, blubbering.

Bucky said, "It's all right, now. It's all wiped clean. Can yuh understand that, Ralph? It's all wiped out."

Ralph said, "Yuh—yuh always did it. Always saved me. How many times when we were kids yuh saved me. I cain't stand to see yuh hurt, Bucky. If yuh hadn't slanged Mary I'd never 've touched yuh. You know that, Bucky."

Bucky said, "It's all right, I tell yuh. Jest fergit everything."

"The kid—his name is Bucky. His real, reg'lar name," sobbed Ralph. He had his handkerchief against the wound, trying to stanch the blood. There was a lot of blood, Bucky thought coolly; too much.

He was sinking. The doctor knelt and bared the wound. It was a nice shirt, silk, but the doc cut it away as if it was calico. The doc said, "He'll have to get to bed. I'll have to probe."

A buckboard came into sight, flying out of a cloud of dust. A small figure was at the reins, urging the matched bays on to greater speed. Ralph said flatly, "Mary missed me. She's a-comin' in. Fix him up, Doc. Fix him so we kin take him—home."

He wheeled on Pappy. "And if any law officer comes in lookin' for him, tell him I kilt Nix, you hear? They ain't goin' to git him. He's been fightin' other people's battles and movin' on and fightin' agin for too dang long. This-here was self defense and everybody knows it. Send the dang lawmen t' me. There ain't no master in this country now. But there ain't no salves, neither. And I'm big enough to protect my brother!"

He stood watching the buckboard come in, his face working. He caught the small woman in his arms as she leaped over the wheel and led her to where the lean figure lay. They stood with bent heads, watching the doctor make Bucky more comfortable.

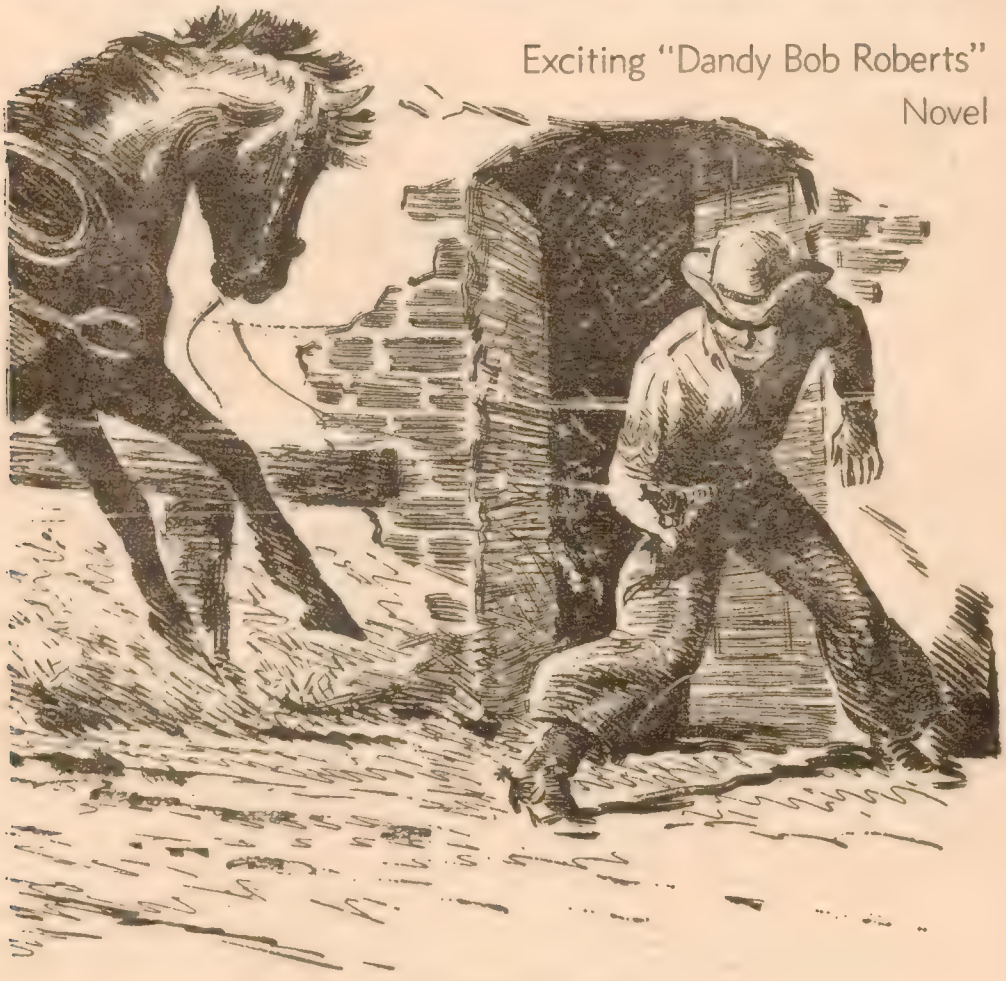
The Man Who Broke

He tried to draw in, but the lead sizzled by him—too damned close. . . .

By BENNETT FOSTER

the Bank at Gila City

Exciting "Dandy Bob Roberts" Novel



CHAPTER ONE

Blackmail in Gila City

TROUBLE comes from little things. The sun may be brightly shining, the soft wind blowing, the larks singing and all well with the world; then a little cloud about the size of a man's hat appears and the rain falls straight down. In Gila City trouble was precipitated when Mrs. Luella Mae Fitzhenry

Meet Dandy Bob Roberts, that suave frontier gent who would talk the gold inlays out of his maiden aunt, but couldn't soft-soap a plugged dime from the Gila City Bank. . . . And Old Man Duggan, whiskey-tippling rapscallion, who knew how to bust the bank at Gila City—but didn't have dynamite enough. . . . And of course, the Widow Fennessy, husband-hunting lady of means, who figured that Dandy Bob's financial straights might prove to be her salvation—and his own damnation!

blackballed the Widow Fennessy as a member of the Literary Society. Subsequent events made hell look like a burned-out Roman candle.

"The Widdy," old man Duggan later said, "bowed her neck an' went to pawin' an' bellerin'. She throwed dust over both shoulders an' she had a horn drooped for trouble." Dandy Bob Roberts, as usual, had no comment, although he played a major part in the affair.

The Fitzhenrys—Luella Mae and Sholto—made a much-heralded arrival in Gila City. They came from Phoenix where Sholto had run a bank, rented a house on the Hill, where lived Gila City's elite, and Sholto Fitzhenry, gray-haired, impressive and portly, visited the merchants, the mine owners and others of wealth.

Luella Mae, working the other side of the street, as it were, forgathered with the wives of said merchants, mine owners, and others. From these endeavors arose two institutions. The men, with Fitzhenry as leader and promotor, subscribed stock, secured a charter and organized a bank. The women, meeting with Luella Mae, formed the Gila City Literary Society.

Two prosperous citizens, the Widow Violet Fennessy and Dandy Bob Roberts, were excluded from the organizations. In the instance of the bank, the fly in the ointment was old man Duggan.

"I don't think," Jim Frazee the postmaster said, "we ought to ask Mrs. Fennessy or Dandy Bob Roberts to take stock. The Widow's goin 'to marry Duggan an' Dandy Bob is Duggan's partner. If we take them in we got to take Duggan too, an' I don't want that lyin' old sot around any bank I'm connected with." To this statement the stockholders concurred.

It was otherwise with the ladies. Violet Fennessy's name was proposed by Mrs. Watson, the assayer's wife. "She owns the Limerick Girl mine," said Mrs. Watson, "and she's wealthy. She could help out on the finance committee."

Luella Mae fixed Mrs. Watson with a clammy eye. "Really, my dear," she drawled, "I don't believe we should lower the tone of our little group, do you? I haven't met Mrs. Fennessy socially, of course, but we all know she has *that woman* living with her." At this point the meeting took time out for thirty minutes of scandal.

To understand Mrs. Fitzhenry's reference it is necessary to go back to an earlier date. Violet Fennessy did indeed have a house guest and it was quite logical for the ladies refer to her as *"that woman."* Her name was Alice Moore and she came to the Widow under unusual circumstances.

Gila City was not without reverence for the Arts. Jack Oldham operated the Gila City Opera House and internationally known *artistes* were sometimes imported from distant points to display their gifts. As a rule, however, Gila City audiences preferred less etherial and more fleshy talent, something like "Delehenty's Variety Show, Girls! Girls! Girls!" and it was from this very aggregation that the Widow collected her guest.

The play came up shortly after midnight when members of the troupe were returning from the theater to the New York Hotel. Their way led past the Widow's cottage and, immediately in front of the cottage, Delehenty and his principal male comic undertook to settle an argument of long standing.

Eight shots were fired, one of which placed a period to Delehenty's career, a second broke the Widow's parlor window, and a third accidentally found lodgment in Alice Moore, doing her no good. Dandy Bob Roberts, old man Duggan and Violet Fennessy had been to the show and the men had taken the Widow home. They were in her parlor when the altercation took place. Duggan dodged behind the

Widow when the shots were fired, while Dandy Bob went boiling out the door. Poor light and a stolen horse saved the comic, and Bob returned, holstering his gun, to find the Widow and Duggan bending over the girl.

"That un's dead," Duggan announced with a casual nod toward Delehenty. "This one ain't, though. I guess I'd better take her in." He stooped to lift the girl.

"Ye will not!" the Widow announced, noting the charms a disordered dress displayed. "Ye'd like nawthin' better. I'll take her in meself. Hold the light, Duggan. Bob, run for the doctor."

DUGGAN took the lamp, Dandy Bob departed, and the Widow bent and lifted. When Dandy Bob returned with Doctor Spier, the Widow had Alice in bed and was crooning over her.

"I'll not have it!" she declared when Doc Spier suggested that the girl be moved to the hotel. "Trust her to thim actors? No, indeed! I'll keep her here. Now, Pretty, you lie still whilst the doctor fixes ye. Be easy, Doc. If ye hurt her I'll have yer hide."

The Widow's heart was as big as her shoulders were broad, and Alice Moore had won it in brief moments. So, while Delehenty's troop dispersed and went its way, the *ingenue* of said troupe remained at Violet Fennessy's cottage, gravely ill at first and then gradually recuperating. To that cottage the men of Gila City beat a path.

The girl was beautiful. Wan from her illness, she held court in the Widow's parlor, resting on the lounge. Her black hair spread upon a snowy pillow, framed her pale, heart-shaped face. Her voice was sweet with a husky lowness, her eyes were blue as Irish skies, her lips, aided a little, perhaps, from her make-up box, were full and red.

Doc Spier called daily, long after his services were no longer necessary; Jim Frazee, the postmaster, delivered mail in person; Sol Finebaum came up from his store with a box of candy which he said the Widow had bought but forgotten; Grady, who owned the Mint Saloon, brought wine for the convalescent; Watson, the assayer, came with a report on the Limerick Girl's ore.

All the single bucks and most of the married men came, but of all who called at Violet Fennessy's, Joe Glennen, editor of the *Gila City Herald,* was the most frequent and persistent.

"Sure," said the Widow fondly, "it reminds me of whin I was a gurl meself, it does so. I was always the wan to have the men buzzin' around like bees. Ain't she the pretty thing now?" The Widow smiled at Alice Moore. "Duggan, if ye so much as look at her, I'll give ye the back of me hand!"

So Alice Moore, her past unknown and her future unpredictable, remained with Violet Fennessy while the bank was organized and the Literary Society formed.

When the Widow learned of this later, and of her own failure to be included in the membership, her eyes clouded and her brow furrowed. When she discovered the purported cause, the Widow clenched her big red fists.

"So," she snarled, "they say *that* about her, do they? I'll have ye know Alice is a decent gurl, she is. I'm goin' to keep her here. Sure, I've money enough for us both an' as for that high-toned Jezebel from Phoenix. . . ."

What the Widow said about Luella Mae scorched the neatly starched and ironed curtains of the parlor. "I'll show her," the Widow concluded. "Just give me time to think."

For a day or two she cogitated and then summoned Dandy Bob. "Bob," the Widow announced, "I'm goin' to give a party. Ye'll haul out what I need from Tucson, the next trip ye make. An' I want every man an' his wife in town to

come. I went ye to see that they come."

Dandy Bob Roberts, tall and dark and saturninely cynical, felt that he was, in a way, responsible for Violet Fennessy. It was he who had discovered the lost vein in the Limerick Girl, he who had kept the mine safe for the Widow when men had sought to steal it. Not that Bob had done these things from goodness of heart or greatness of spirit. In each instance Dandy Bob Roberts was trying to feather his own nest, but he felt responsible, nevertheless.

Moreover, he was at the moment engaged in a very lucrative business deal involving the Limerick Girl mine. Through timidity on the part of certain individuals during a recent Apache outbreak, good straight shooting and a lot of luck, Dandy Bob Roberts and Duggan had come into possession of a freighting outfit. Their wagons hauled ore from the Limerick Girl to the stamp mill in Gila City, and the Widow could, if she wished, end this contract.

"Duggan," said Dandy Bob, "is goin' to Tucson tomorrow. We're goin' to haul the safe for the new bank. Give him your list. I don't know about the party, but I'll look around."

So next morning, armed with a shopping list and admonished by both his partner and his affianced, old man Duggan pulled out for Tucson, and while he was gone Dandy Bob Roberts made some overtures and some inquiries.

"Don't give your party," he reported back to Violet Fennessy. "They won't come. The men would like to, but their wives won't let 'em."

"Ye could make 'em," suggested the Widow. "Bob, if ye put the pressure on they'd—"

Bob waved a weary hand. "They're more afraid of their wives than they are of me," he said. "As long as Alice is here. . . ." He stopped short, interrupted by a gasp. Alice Moore was at the door of the kitchen where Bob and the Widow talked. Her face was more pallid than it should have been, and her blue eyes were wide.

"Now look what ye done!" the Widow chided. "Ye've upset the child. Here, darlin', come back to bed now. Ye've no business bein' on yer feet."

The Widow led her charge away and Dandy Bob Roberts, alone in the kitchen, thoughtfully ate a chunk of gingerbread. Like every other male in Gila City, Bob Roberts was in love with Alice Moore. Also, Bob felt that he had been slighted when he was not invited to buy stock in the bank.

Reaching out for another piece of gingerbread, Dandy Bob Roberts sat down to think things out. It would be fine to help the Widow and Alice; it would be good to take a fall out of the high and mighty Sholto Fitzhenry and show Gila City that Bob Roberts was necessary to a bank or any other enterprise. And—Bob's eyes narrowed—banks contained money. Maybe there was a way to get a little of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Light Fingers in the Night

OLD man Duggan's trip to Tucson was backed by a definite reason. Bob Roberts was negotiating for the purchase of the Star Livery barn and feed yard and he wanted Duggan out of the way. The old man lied, he talked, he bragged in the wrong places, and he got drunk. Bob, knowing thoroughly the havoc Duggan could cause, heaved a sigh of relief when the old man departed.

To secure the money, it was necessary that Bob mortgage both his own outfit and also the one he was acquiring. Deeds were drawn and mortgages made. Bob was lost in a maze of legal verbage in which the words, "for and in considera-

tion of one dollar and other good and valuable consideration," occurred again and again. From this maze he emerged, possessor of all Gila City's hauling equipment and with the knowledge that he couldn't keep it unless he paid the new bank eight percent on a considerable amount of money.

Duggan, enroute to Tucson, did not wonder why he had been sent. Duggan was accustomed to being ridden with a tight rein. When the bridle was pulled off, far be it from Duggan to ask why.

To do the old man justice, he did not take too great advantage of his freedom. Duggan's weakness were not cards and women, but liquor. He kept this in abeyance, drinking no more than a quart a day to stimulate his imagination.

While the teamsters, roustabouts and warehouse men toiled to reinforce the wagon box and load the massive safe, Duggan kept out of the sun and bragged on Gila City. He found, naturally, that saloons gave the best shelter and offered the most willing listeners. In his way, Duggan porformed the function of the modern Chamber of Commerce.

"Bank?" said Duggan to his audience. "Sure, we got a bank. An' lemme tell you, that safe ain't nowhere big enough. Sure, it's the biggest in the Territory, but it's too damned little." He paused, hiccoughed, then: "That safe," he resumed, "is just to hold the small change. We dug a mine shaft a hundred feet deep an' put in a steel door to hold the real money. Why, say—"

At this point two of Duggan's listeners withdrew. One was the male comic of Delehenty's Variety Show and the other was a rockfaced man with powder pits liberally besprinkling his countenance. "Do you suppose that old coot's telling the truth?" the pitted man demanded.

Kerr Joslin, the comic, shook his head. "I was in Gila City, remember?" he answered. "That's where I downed Delehenty, damn him, and' my wife's still there. That old fool's lyin', Spike."

Spike licked his lips and looked at the safe, standing on crib work and ready to be put on the wagon. "If he was tellin' the truth," said Spike, "we could take every dime of it. Take a little nitro and I can open that old box as easy as I'd take the lid off a can of sardines."

"You could?" Joslin's eyebrows shot upward.

"Sure." Scornfully.

Joslin rolled and lighted a cigarette and squinted through the smoke. "I don't think," he said slowly, "anybody in Gila City would know me if I made up a little. Let's go down there, Spike. That damned wife of mine. I want to get her back with me, and if you can open that safe as easy as you say, there's no reason not to do it."

"Let's go," said Spike. "I'm ready just any time."

OLD man Duggan and the admiring audience came from the saloon. "There she is, boys," said old man Duggan. "Biggest safe in the Territory for the biggest little town. An' who hauls her? Duggan & Roberts, that's who. Best freighters a-goin'."

By noon the next day the safe was loaded and Buckshot Sever, the wagon master—five times indicted but never convicted of murder—decreed a start. Old man Duggan rode in the wagon with the safe. His shopping was all done, the Widow Fennessy's goods were loaded in the following wagons along with miscellaneous supplies such as dynamite, fuse and caps.

Duggan, accompanied by a quart of Chapman & Gore, reclined and refreshed himself. In his hatband was a sealed envelope containing instructions and the combination of the safe. Halfway down the quart Duggan took off his hat and found that sweat had loosened the mucilage of the envelope.

"Hm," said Duggan. "Le's see."

Duggan could neither read nor write, but he could match figures. He knew the envelope contained the combination for he had been so informed. It was natural that he should remove the sheet of paper in the envelope and equally natural that he should try the combination. He missed a time or two, but with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, tried and tried again.

Presently the safe door opened. Duggan, amazed and pleased with his prowess, closed it and repeated the process. By nightfall when the wagons camped, he could open the safe every time, by the next night he could open it without referring to the combination in the envelope, and at noon on the third day when the wagons swung into Gila City, old man Duggan could just about open the bank's new safe by sense of touch.

Dandy Bob Roberts was on hand to see the safe unloaded. To Dandy Bob, Duggan gave the resealed envelope, not mentioning his new accomplishment. Bob delivered the envelope to Sholto Fitzhenry and began the unloading, and Duggan, utterly worn out by his labors, took a drink at the Rajah Saloon.

From there he repaired to the adobe he shared with his partner, noting as he unlocked the place that someone had moved into the house next door. His curiosity was aroused but he held it down, peeled off his clothes and took a nap. At six o'clock when Dandy Bob, hot and tired, came to clean up for supper, Duggan roused.

"Get her unloaded?" he inquired.

"Got her in the building and set," Bob answered. "Why didn't you stay an' help?"

"I loaded her at Tucson," Duggan answered. "It was up to you to unload her. *I* didn't have no help. Who is livin' next door, Bob?"

"Fellow named Smith an' a man named Spike," Bob answered, groping for a towel to dry his face. "Spike's a hard-lookin' jasper. His face looks like he's been in an explosion. I've seen Smith somewhere's but I can't place him." Bob rehung the towel. "Duggan, I bought the Star livery while you were gone. Gave the bank a mortgage on it an' on our outfit for the money. Okay?"

Old man Duggan's eyes widened. At one time Duggan had been a hostler at the Star livery barn. "You bought it?" Duggan exclaimed, and then, as the full impact came home to him, "You an' me own the Star livery! Wait till I tell the Widdy."

Old man Duggan, without hat or coat, went flying out the door. Grinning, Dandy Bob finished his dressing, then taking the old man's neglected garments and followed him.

Duggan and the Widow were in the Fennessy kitchen, the Widow having relegated the parlor to Alice Moore and Joe Glennen. Violet Fennessy had not seen Bob since the purchase of the Star livery, but the news was spread all over town and she had not been surprised at Duggan's announcement. But she was a little angry with Dandy Bob.

"Why didn't you come to me for the money instead of borryin' from the bank?" the Widow demanded.

Bob had not gone to the Widow for good and definite reasons. Although Violet Fennessy was engaged to Duggan, she had not given up angling for a more suitable mate. Dandy Bob Roberts was on her list of prospects and he had no desire to be indebted to the Widow.

"Just tryin' to help the bank get started," Bob replied. "Anyhow it's good business. All the directors need to have haulin' done an' they'll throw it our way now because we owe 'em money."

The Widow sniffed, unsatisfied. She had an idea of Bob's real reasoning.

"An'," said Bob, "it wouldn't look right. Folks would say we was takin' ad-

vantage of you because you an' Duggan are goin 'to get married. They'd say he was marryin' you for your money."

Duggan *was* marrying Violet for her money. The attractions of the Limerick Girl far outweighed those of the mine's owner in Duggan's estimation. The Widow opened her mouth to speak, closed it again with a snap. Sounds came from the parlor, then the front door banged.

"Now what do ye suppose is wrong?" the Widow demanded. She hurried out of the kitchen.

DANDY Bob and Duggan waited a seemly time. They were about to go when the Widow returned. "That Joe Glennen!" she said. "He asked Alice to marry him."

"What's wrong with that?" Duggan demanded.

"I dunno, but somethin'," the Widow's face was wrathful. "Alice is cryin'. You two git. I don't want to be bothered with ye."

Bob and Duggan got, both filled with curiosity. In the Rajah Saloon they found Glennen drinking moodily and alone. "What's wrong, Joe?" Duggan asked, sidling up beside the young editor.

Glennen favored the old man with a long look. "None of your damned business!" he snapped, then downed his drink, and left.

For the next few weeks things were pretty dark around the Fennessy cottage. Old man Duggan, visiting his affianced, ran into trouble with every call. The Widow's temper was black as Satan's. Alice moped about the house, helping her benefactress with the housework but saying very little.

There was still plenty of callers but Joe Glennen was not among them. The Widow's evil temper could be traced partly to that fact, partly to her companion's moodiness, and partly to her feud with Luella Mae Fitzhenry. Violet Fennessy had taken Dandy Bob's advice and while she had all the materials necessary for a party, she issued no invitations.

Luella was holding all the cards and the Widow was not fool enough to go against a stacked deck. The Gila City Literary Society was meeting once a week and once each week Joe Glennen faithfully reported the meetings in the *Herald*.

"That Joe Glennen!" the Widow snapped to Bob. "I don't blame Alice for not havin' him. But," her voice softened, "she's in love with him. I know that. Bob, ye've got to do somethin'."

Dandy Bob shook his head. It seemed to him that whenever anything went wrong the trouble was packed to his door and left there. It was always up to Bob Roberts.

So, inevitably, the end of the month approached with payday for the mines and the stamp mill, with the monthly clean-up from the Silver Dollar and other money-makers. Shipments came in via Wells-Fargo, small, heavily sealed packages to be deposited in the bank's big new safe. Just two days before the month's end, Sholto Fitzhenry met Bob Roberts on the street.

"How are you, Roberts?" he greeted. "How is the freighting business?"

"Pretty fair," said Dandy Bob. "I've made a couple of contracts that ought to pay off in a month or two."

"Ah." Sholto cleared his throat. "Speaking of payments: I suppose you have your interest ready?"

"Why," said Bob, surprised, "I don't pay interest until I pay the principal, an' that ain't due for pretty near a year."

Sholto Fitzhenry shook his head. "Your note calls for monthly payments," he said. "Better look it up, Roberts."

Fitzhenry proceeded on his way. Bob hurried to the office of the Star livery and dug his copy of note and mortgage out of hiding. He read it over, read it over again and swore. Dandy Rob Roberts had set

into a crooked and unfamiliar game. Bedazzled by Fitzhenry and the bank's lawyer, Bob Roberts had agreed to pay interest at the rate of eight percent per month; not per year—*per month!*

"What's the matter, Bob?" old man Duggan queried, entering from the barn.

Bob Roberts, with profanity intermingled, told Duggan what the matter was.

"We can borry from the Widdy," Duggan commented, undisturbed.

"I know we can, but I don't want to," Dandy Bob rasped. "An' this makes me sore. I was a damned fool, an' let 'em rook me. Why, eight percent a month will take every dime we make. We'll never pay off. The bank will get the whole outfit. Damn Fitzhenry anyhow!"

Duggan was still placid. "You let me study on it some," he said. "I'll figger somethin'. I allus thought you was smart, Bob, but it looks like the old man would have to pull you outen this one."

Duggan strolled out. It was seldom that old man Duggan found Dandy Bob in a jackpot; generally things worked the other way. The old man was even a little pleased. He bought a quart of Chapman & Gore at the Mint and carrying it carefully, repaired to the adobe he occupied with Dandy Bob. When the whiskey had been uncorked and sampled, old man Duggan chuckled.

"Looks like," said Duggan to the unresponsive walls, "Bob's caught with his pants down. Sure does."

A knock sounded on the door, it opened at Duggan's call and one of the nextdoor neighbors thrust in his head. "Got a little bottle?" he queried. "I'd like to borrow one."

"Why, cer'nly," said Duggan. "Half pint be big enough?"

Rising, he brought an empty bottle from among those in a corner of the room. The neighbor spoke his thanks and went away. Duggan mused awhile longer. Then, with dusk settling, he left the adobe, enroute to carry out his suggestion and borrow from the Widow. But upon application, he found Violet Fennessy adamant.

"If," said Violet Fennessy, "Dandy Bob needs money, let *him* come an' ask me for it. I'll not lend you any, Duggan. Send Bob to talk to me." There was a gleam in the Widow's eye.

So repulsed, Duggan went to the livery barn. Bob Roberts was not there, nor was he eating supper at the Elite Restaurant. Duggan went to the Mint and took three drinks which, coupled with the Chapman & Gore imbibed in the adobe, built him a fine edge. Bob was not at the Mint. Duggan went on to the Rajah. There was Bob, bucking the tiger and losing. Duggan tried to talk to Bob, but was ordered off. He took two more drinks and, with whiskey fuming in his brain, walked out.

It was fully dark now. The old man moped down the street, pausing by the bank building. The new adobe structure showed no lights. Duggan scowled at the bank and then, like a comet flashing across the sky, an idea struck him. Cautiously and craftily Duggan crossed the street.

The bank door was locked and he prowled around the building, finding a window in its rear. New adobe settles unevenly and the window frame was warped. There was a small space between the bottom of the sash and the sill.

Duggan grunted and hurried away. When he returned, he carried an empty grain sack taken from the feed room of the Star livery, and an old wagon spoke acquired at the same source. The spoke made a pry, the window went up with a shrill squeal, and Duggan crouched to listen.

There was no alarm. Satisfied of that, the old man crawled over the sill into the dark interior. He moved by sense of touch now, and presently his fingers encountered the smooth iron of the safe. Duggan chuckled as he touched the combi-

nation knob and rubbed its rilled surface.

He brought a match from his pocket, struck it and in the light of yellow flame, turned the knob, right, then left, right and left again. There was a faint click. Duggan seized the handle, turned it, pulled, and the safe door swung noiselessly open.

CHAPTER THREE

Holdup

WHEN Duggan had departed, the Widow Fennessy waited for awhile, thinking that Dandy Bob Roberts would appear. Bob did not come and the Widow got ready for bed. In nightcap and gown she went to the door of Alice Moore's room and looked in. The girl was still dressed and sitting by the small table, writing.

"Sure now, darlin'," the Widow chided, "it's time for bed. You shouldn't be sittin' up so late."

Alice left her chair and came to the Widow, putting her arms around the older woman. "You've been so good to me," she murmured against the Widow's cheek. "So good. Promise me that no matter what happens you won't think badly of me?"

"An' how could any wan think bad things about a sweet child like you?" The Widow patted Alice's back. "Go to bed now and sleep good. Good night."

"Goodbye," Alice said, and kissed the Widow.

"Goodbye?" Violet Fennessy drew back in surprise. "Ye mean good night, don't ye?"

"Good night, of course," Alice returned. "Yes, of course I meant good night."

"Good night, then," said the Widow, and padded off to her room. The girl waited. Presently the sounds of heavy breathing came from Violet Fennessy's bedroom.

Cautiously Alice Moore moved. There was a small grip under the bed. She pulled it out. Her coat was in the closet. She put it on. Then, blowing out the lamp, she tiptoed from the room, through the kitchen and out of the house. She paused there to look back and brush her hand across her eyes.

"Goodbye," she whispered. "Oh, goodbye!"

With the grip dangling, she slipped along the street, through the shadows, toward the edge of town.

There was a light in the adobe house next to Bob Roberts' place, and horses stamped in the shed behind it. Reaching the adobe, the girl knocked. The door opened and she entered.

Kerr Joslin grinned sardonically at her, and Spike, beside the table, grunted. "So you came?" Joslin drawled. "That was smart, but then you were always a smart woman. If you hadn't, I would have come for you. You hadn't met my wife, have you, Spike?"

"I don't like this," Spike said bluntly. "I told you before I didn't like it. There's no use hamperin' ourselves with a woman."

"But Alice won't hamper us," Joslin said. He was watching the girl narrowly, his eyes thin-slitted and evil. "Alice will do exactly as I tell her. You see, Spike, my wife loves me very much, don't you, Alice?"

"I hate you," the girl said flatly. "You know that. I'd kill you if I dared." She lowered the grip toward the table top.

"Don't set that down!" Spike snapped. Carefully he reached out and picked up a half-pint whiskey bottle, half full of an oily, yellowish liquid. "Jar this an' you could blow us all to hell. This is nitro."

Joslin laughed. "She would like that," he said, "wouldn't you, my dear? But then, if I were to die you'd never know what happened to the boy, would you? You'd never find him. Put down your grip now. It's safe enough."

The girl set down her grip.

"We'll visit awhile," Joslin said. "We've plenty of time. Sit down. I think—"

He paused to listen. A door banged shut, faintly. "Our friends next door have come home," Joslin grinned. "Now, Alice, you will stay here when Spike and I are gone. When we come back we'll ride away from Gila City. And if we reach San Francisco safely, perhaps I'll tell you what you want to know. Perhaps."

TIME hung heavily. Joslin smoked, looked at his watch and rolled another cigarette. Spike took a bar of yellow soap and kneaded it in his heavy hands. That soap would be used to seal the safe door and to build a cup in which the nitroglycerine would be poured. Alice Moore sat quietly watching first one man, then the other.

"Time to go," Joslin stated, his voice tense. "All right, Spike?"

Spike grunted and put the soap in his pocket, picked up the half-pint whiskey bottle carefully and put it in another pocket, added fuse and caps. "Okay," he said.

Joslin lifted a heavy wagon sheet and spoke to the girl. "We'll be back. Wait for us." He had Spike went out the door.

The girl waited. Time wore on endlessly. She moved to the door, opened it, listened, and then returned to her chair, leaving the door open. A dull, muffled cough sounded, more a concussion of air than a real noise.

There was quiet and then, faint and far off, shots pounded in the night, then came sounds of yelling. The girl sprang up, facing the door, her eyes dark pools. She heard the pound of running feet. Spike burst through the door, confronting her, hastily emptying his pockets of caps, fuse, and the almost empty bottle of nitroglycerine.

"They got Joslin," he rasped. "I'm gone!" Wheeling from the table, he ran out of the little adobe and within seconds a horse pounded away. Still Alice Moore stood, transfixed.

Again steps sounded and now the girl moved, darting toward the door—too late. The steps were close. She moved back into the room and old man Duggan, eyes bleared, whiskey heavy on his breath, came shambling in.

"Say," said Duggan, "I heard some kind of racket. Sounded like a shot in one of the mines. Woke me up. Say!" The old man's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He struggled with his surprise. "Alice!" old man Duggan rasped. "What are you doin' here?"

The girl did not answer. Seizing Duggan's arm she pleaded with him. "Take me home, Duggan. Take me back to Mrs. Fennessy's and don't let anyone see us. Please. Please, Duggan!"

"Sure," said Duggan. "Come on." With the girl still clinging to his arm he moved toward the door. A half-pint whiskey bottle stood on the table, a small amount of liquid in it. Duggan, passing the table, reached out, picked up the bottle and dropped it into the pocket of his coat. A man never could tell when he was going to need a drink.

Old man and girl went out into the night. They moved through shadows, staying in the gloom, circling the center of town where there were lights and excitement. By devious ways they came to the back of Violet Fennessy's cottage.

"There you are," Duggan said. "Back door's open. She never locks it. G'night."

"You won't tell?" the girl pleaded. "Promise me you won't tell?"

"Ain't nothin' to tell," Duggan assured, anxious to join the excitement. "G'night."

He was gone and Alice Moore, her little grip hugged close, tiptoed across the Widow's back porch, opened the door and slipped into the kitchen.

"Is that you, Alice?" the Widow's

sleepy voice hailed. "Something woke me up."

"Something woke me, too," the girl answered. "I got up to get a drink. I'm going to bed now."

Old man Duggan, leaving the cottage, hurried to town. The saloons were alight, and a crowd milled by the bank. As Duggan joined the crowd, Sholto Fitzhenry, with Watson and Jim Freeze, came from the building. "Clean," said Frazee. "The safe's cleaned out. Everything taken." Fitzhenry's massive head hung on his chest.

"What happened?" Duggan demanded.

"Bank was robbed. Two fellers blew the safe an' one got away with the money." The answer came terse and sharp.

"What about the other one?" Duggan asked after a moment.

"He's over there." Duggan's companion nodded. "Dandy Bob Roberts was goin' home an' happened to be passin' the bank. This feller took a shot at Bob an' Bob fixed his clock."

Dungan pushed on through the crowd. Dandy Bob Roberts, Frank McMain, Gila City's deputy sheriff, and half a dozen others stood in a circle around a body. Looking at the upturned face, Duggan recognized the man who had wanted an empty bottle.

"No use standin' here," McMains said. "Let's get organized. These fellows had horses staked out, you can bet on it. We'll organize a posse an' make a swing around the town. Soon as it gets light we'll trail him. Let's go. Bob, I want you an' Frazee an' . . ." McMains continued, naming the members of the posse, giving them their instructions.

Old man Duggan left, headed toward the Star Livery barn. The posse would want horses, and the sheriff's office was always good pay. Duggan would rouse the night hostler and get the barn open. He was filled with civic virtue, was old man Duggan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pangs of Conscience

ON THE day following the bank robbery, Gila City seethed and bubbled. McMains and his posse, returning empty-handed, found the citizenry in an uproar. The possemen repaired to the Rajah, the Mint, and other emporiums to slake their thirsts and learn what was going on in town.

Plenty was going on. Everybody was disgruntled and mad. Payrolls were missing, there was no money in Gila City and miners, millers, merchants—everyone blamed the bank. If there had been no bank this could not have happened.

Gila City's wealth would not have been centralized but spread out in pockets, in company safes, in buried tin cans and elsewhere. Sholto Fitzhenry and the bank directors were not popular, even with themselves. They held a meeting to see what could be done and there was another meeting scheduled for the evening. As stockholders they were liable for the loss and if they paid off, every one of them would be broke.

"No," Dandy Bob Roberts told Jim Frazee in the Rajah, "we didn't find him. The wind wiped out his tracks. Looks like you boys are stuck, Jim. Take about all you can raise to put the bank on its feet, won't it?"

"Looks that way," Frazee agreed dispiritedly. "That fellow you shot, Bob. He lived next door to you, didn't he?"

"They both did," Dandy Bob agreed.

"We searched their place," Frazee said. "Didn't find a thing but some fuse and caps."

Dandy Bob put down his empty glass. "I'm kind of glad you didn't ask me to buy stock, Jim," he drawled. "So long. I'm goin' home an' clean up."

Duggan was in the adobe when Dandy Bob returned. The old man was prone on

his bed, gazing cheerfully at the ceiling. Bob sniffed, estimated that Duggan was fairly sober, and took off his coat.

"You won't have to pay the bank now that they lost the mortgage, will you?" Duggan queried.

That feature hadn't occurred to Bob. He paused in his undressing. "I guess we're stuck anyhow," he said. "They'll have the mortgage recorded in Tucson."

Duggan rolled over on the bed and an unfamiliar crackling sounded.

"What's that?" Dandy Bob demanded. He looked up at old man Duggan.

"Somethin' under the mattress, I reckon." Duggan's reply did not sound quite natural. Dandy Bob walked over and looked at the old man.

"Sounded like paper," he said. Bending, he peered under the bed, then knelt and reached with a long arm. When he stood again he held a package of crisp new bills. "Duggan!" Dandy Bob thundered, staring down at the money.

Before the wrath in that voice old man Duggan quailed. "I was just tryin' to he'p out, Bob," he said. "I'd learnt to open the safe comin' down from Tucson an' when the Widdy wouldn't loan me the money, I was passin' the bank so I went in."

"Get up!" Dandy Bob ordered. "Let's see."

Duggan got up. Dandy Bob rolled back the mattress. There, exposed to view was the loot of the First Bank of Gila City, money, papers, documents, everything.

"My Lord!" exclaimed Dandy Bob Roberts, and let the mattress fall back in place.

"I didn't mean no harm, Bob," old man Duggan began, pleadingly. "I was just tryin' to he'p out."

Bob sat down on top of all that money and stared at his partner. This surpassed anything Duggan had ever done. "You ain't mad, are you?" Duggan queried tentatively.

BOB ROBERTS wasn't mad, he was scared. For just a moment, standing there, visions of wealth flashed through his mind, but fright dimmed them. Gila City was in a hanging mood and if the town ever discovered who had robbed the bank, Bob and Duggan both would decorate cottonwoods. It might be possible to get away with the money, but Bob was dubious.

"How much is there?" Bob demanded.

"I dunno," Duggan answered. "I was goin' to count it but I ain't so good at figgers, Bob."

"If we get caught with this they'll hang us," said Dandy Bob, "higher than hell. Do you know that, Duggan?"

Duggan shivered. "What'll we do, Bob?" There was a quaver in the old man's voice.

"I got to think," said Bob. He got up, selected a clean shirt and unfolded it.

"Bob," said Duggan, "if I give it back to 'em—"

"They'll still hang you!" Bob pulled the shirt over his head and tucked in the tails. "I told you I had to think. Now keep still!"

Old man Duggan kept still. Dandy Bob finished dressing, cast a look about the room and picked up his hat. "We'll go eat," he stated. "Come on."

They went to town, locking the door behind them. In the Elite Restaurant, Duggan displayed no appetite. Dandy Bob was well along in his meal when Watson, the assayer, walked in.

"We got a meeting of the bank directors over in Finebaum's store," Watson informed. "They sent me over after you, Bob. We got a proposition we want you to look at."

"Be right with you," Bob said. Watson went out and Bob turned to Duggan. "You go home," he directed, low-voiced. "Don't you leave the place till I get back. Hear me?"

Duggan nodded and Bob walked out of

the restaurant. As he reached the sidewalk he bumped into Doc Spier.

"Excuse me," Bob apologized, recoiling, then, recognizing the doctor: "You're in an awful hurry, Doc."

"The Widow called me," Doc Spier said. "That girl's sick again. Sorry I didn't see you, Bob." He hurried along while Bob crossed the street and entered Finebaum's store.

The bank directors, with Sholto Fitzhenry, were assembled in Sol Finebaum's office. Their talk ceased abruptly as Bob entered. He stood, tall and straight and immaculate as always, and looked around the room. "You wanted to see me?" he drawled.

"We did, Bob," Jim Frazee spoke for the directors. "We've got a job for you. Sit down."

Bob sat down, and Frazee, after a glance at his fellows, continued. "We want you to recover the bank's money, Bob. That's why we sent for you."

"Kind of a chore," Dandy Bob drawled. "That fellow got clear away, you know. We lost his tracks about fifteen miles north of town. The wind had blowed 'em out. We spent the day lookin' an' couldn't find a trace of 'em. You've sent out descriptions of him?"

"To Tucson, Lordsburg, Phoenix, every place we could think of," Frazee agreed. "We don't think they'll do much good. Here's the proposition, Bob: you know a lot of people that—well, you know a lot of folks."

Bob hid his grin. What Jim Frazee meant was that Dandy Bob Roberts knew a lot of the undercover population of southern Arizona—the bad boys who held up stages, ran contraband across the border, stole cattle and otherwise stayed outside the law.

"Sure," Bob agreed, "I know a lot of people."

"And we thought," Frazee said, "that if you went to work for us you could learn something. We'd make it worth your while. We'd pay you five percent of whatever money you recovered an' no questions asked. There was fifty thousand dollars in that safe, Bob."

Bob pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, and did a little mental calculation. All that money lying under Duggan's mattress, and they would pay him five percent, two thousand five hundred dollars, for getting it back. No questions asked. He looked at Sholto Fitzhenry.

"Ain't your customary rate eight per cent?" Bob drawled. "Don't seem like you should ask me to work for less than you charge your customers."

Fitzhenry's face was red. "We do charge eight per cent," Frazee agreed. His eyes circled the faces in the room again. "All right, make it eight per cent."

Bob got up. "You've hired a man," he stated briefly. "Duggan will go with me, of course. I'll start to work on it. An'," he paused and his eyes also circled the room, "if I find the money I hope nobody here forgets what we agreed to." Dandy Bob Roberts went out.

ON THE sidewalk in front of Finebaum's store he paused briefly. He wanted to go home. He wanted to look at that wealth again because four thousand dollars of it was his. Then, recalling Doc Spier and the girl at the Widow Fennessy's, Dandy Bob started along the walk. As he passed the Rajah, Sheriff Frank McMains came from the door.

"Got a minute, Bob?" the deputy asked.

"I was goin' to the Widow's," Bob answered. "Alice is sick an' they sent for Doc."

"I'll go with you," McMains stated and fell into step.

The Widow let them in. Joe Glennen was in the parlor, white-faced, sitting stiffly in a straight chair. The Widow held a finger to her lips. "Shh," she warned. "Doc's with her now. He's goin' to give

her somethin' to make her sleep sound."

Dandy Bob and McMains sat down while the Widow tiptoed to a chair. "It's all me own fault," she berated herself. "Sure, we went down town today an' just as we was passin' Finebaum's warehouse, who should come out but Billy Lister, the Undertaker, an' three Mexicans carryin' a coffin. 'What have ye got there, Billy?' I says to him. 'Do ye really want to see?' he says, an' opens up the coffin top an' there, layin' down inside the coffin was a corpse.

"'Twas the man ye shot, Bob. Alice caught one glimpse of him an' turned as white as one of me sheets. 'Take me home, Vi'let,' she says. 'Please take me home.' So I brung her home. She went into her room an' lay down an' went to cryin'. I couldn't stop her, so I sent for the doctor."

Doc Spier appeared at the door. "I think she'll rest presently," he said. "I've given her a sedative. I'll just wait awhile and see if it works." The doctor seated himself.

McMains, feeling in his pocket, cleared his throat. "That was what I wanted to talk to you about, Bob," he said. "I went through the guy before I turned him over to Lister. There was a letter in his pocket. I read it because I thought there might be somethin' about the bank, but there wasn't. It was all about a kid. Addressed to a convent in San Francisco. Here." McMains brought out a letter, extending it to Dandy Bob. "See if you can make anything out of it."

"Addressed to the Saint Catherine's Convent," Dandy Bob read from the envelope. Unknowingly he raised his voice a trifle. "There's—"

Bob stopped. There was a sound at the bedroom door, a gasping, choking sound. Alice Moore stood there, swaying, holding to the jamb for support. "St. Catherine's," she gasped. "That—oh, Joe, Joe!"

Two long strides took Joe Glennen to her side and he caught the girl up in his arms. The Widow Fennessy was at the editor's heels and behind the Widow came Doc Spier. Glennen carried the girl into the bedroom.

"Now what the hell?" Dandy Bob demanded of Frank McMains.

There was no immediate answer. Presently the Widow appeared. "Give me that letter," she ordered. Bob passed it over, and the Widow returned to the bedroom.

Fifteen minutes later, Doc Spier came out, looking oddly at Dandy Bob and McMains, and picked up his hat. "I run into some of the damndest things," Doc Spier announced, conversationally, "and professional ethics keeps my mouth shut. Gentlemen, take my word for it, we aren't needed here. Joe and Mrs. Fennessy are doing all that needs to be done. If you'll go with me, I'll buy a drink."

Dandy Bob and the deputy followed the doctor. As they passed the bedroom door they caught a glimpse of Joe Glennen kneeling beside the bed. They paused and the Widow closed the door in their faces.

Doc Spier bought the promised drink at the Rajah. When he left them, Bob and McMains discussed and surmised for a time, but Bob was uneasy. He was curious about the happenings at the Widow's cottage, but he was even more concerned about the money under Duggan's mattress.

Bidding McMains good night, he left the saloon and made his way to the adobe. The lamp was lighted and old man Duggan, working on a fresh bottle, occupied the bed.

Bob hung up his hat and took off his coat. "Well," he said to Duggan, "we can get rid of the money now an' make some doin' it. The bank directors hired me to get it back for 'em."

"It's already back," Duggan stated, lowering the bottle.

"What?" Dandy Bob could hardly be-

lieve his ears hearing that information.

"I took it back." Duggan refreshed himself again. "I got to thinkin', Bob. When I make a mistake I set it right. I knowed Fitzhenry was at that meetin' you went to, an' I just hypered home, put the money in a sack an' carried it up to his place. The front door was unlocked an' there wasn't no lights, so I slid in an' dumped the sack behind the sofy."

Old man Duggan retired behind the bottle. Dandy Bob, all the strength gone from his legs, sat down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fast Stage to Tucson

IT TOOK some time for the enormity of Duggan's action to sink in. Dandy Bob Roberts was more or less stunned. When he had recovered sufficiently to start cursing Duggan, he saw that the effort would be wasted. Duggan was asleep and snoring gently.

Dandy Bob undressed and blew out the lamp but he didn't sleep for a long time. Four thousand vanished dollars troubled his mind and when he did sleep he dreamed about them. In the morning, when both awoke, Duggan was penitent, but so accustomed was he to being upbraided, so thick was his hide, that Bob's recriminations hurt not at all.

"Four thousand bucks," Bob said bitterly. "Enough to put us pretty near in the clear, an' you threw it away."

"Well," Duggan said complacently. "we c'n still borry from Vi'let. She wouldn't lend me the money, but she'll let you have it. You got to go an' see her, Bob."

Reluctant as he was, Bob knew that Duggan was right. The Widow was the sole source of available wealth and now that the bank had recovered the mortgage, Bob must go to her. Accordingly, he dressed in his best, shaved, and after breakfasting at the Elite, he walked to the Widow's cottage.

Mrs. Fennessy, face glowing, let him in. She gave Bob no chance to state his errand but began to talk immediately.

"Ye'll never guess," said the Widow. "It's that romantic ye'd never believe it. An' ye done it all, Bob. It would never have happened if it hadn't been for you."

"What wouldn't have happened?" Bob asked.

"Joe and Alice would never of got married." The Widow fairly burbled with her pleasure.

"They ain't married," Bob said. He was just a little confused.

"Of course not. Not yet," the Widow agreed, "but they will be. Come have a cup of coffee whilst I tell ye."

In the kitchen, drinking a superlative cup of coffee, Dandy Bob heard the story. Alice Moore, a stage-struck youngster, and romantic by nature, had met Kerr Joslin in San Francisco and, bedazzled by him, had married the man. The girl's people were well-to-do and although deploring the match, accepted it.

In course of time a boy was born. Then Joslin, running true to form, had become involved in a scandal. Alice's parents had insisted on a separation and had taken their daughter and her child to live with them.

"He kidnapped the baby," the Widow informed. "Stole it away, the divil, an' hid it."

Joslin had insisted that Alice join him and, despite her parents' pleading, the girl had given in. There had followed an Odyssey of travel with cheap shows, when Joslin had used his wife's beauty and accomplishments to make money. Delehenty had hired the two, and Delehenty, learning Alice Moore's story, had tried to help her.

"So Joslin kilt him," the Widow concluded, "an Alice was hurt, accidental. That's when I got her, an' I love her like

she was me own daughter. Ye know the rest, Bob. The man came back, bad cess to him, an' scared Alice. She was goin' to run away from me an' join him again, hopin' she get her baby back.

"Then they robbed the bank an' you shot him an' kilt him dead entirely. It was the sight of him an' the thought of never gettin' her baby that made her sick yesterday. An' last night, when Frank pulled out that letter, it was like a voice from Heaven. The baby's at St. Catherine's Convent in San Francisco an' Alice an' Joe are goin' to get married an' go an' get him."

"Well," said Dandy Bob, "that's fine."

"If only I could give 'em a party," the Widow concluded, her voice wistful. "A announcement party. D'ye think I can, Bob?"

"I don't know," said Dandy Bob. "Maybe."

"If ye can fix it, there's nothin' I wouldn't do for ye," the Widow said. "What was it ye wanted to see me about, Bob?"

Dandy Bob stated his mission. Mrs. Fennessy waved a large and careless hand. "Sure," she agreed, "all the money ye want. I'll get whatever ye need from Tucson. An' Bob, see about a party, will ye?"

LEAVING the Widow Fennessy's, feeling a little easier in his mind, Dandy Bob started toward the Star Livery. He had almost reached the barn when he encountered Jim Frazee and Sholto Fitzhenry. Bob expected to see these two in high spirits, sure that Fitzhenry must have found the loot where Duggan had deposited it. Surprisingly, neither of the men mentioned such a recovery.

"When you goin' to start work on that job, Bob?" Frazee asked. "I thought you'd be headed for Tucson by now."

Bob looked at the postmaster, then at Fitzhenry. It was time to bluff and Bob Roberts bluffed. "Maybe I won't go to Tucson," he said. Maybe I won't go anyplace."

"Do you think it was a local job?" Frazee demanded eagerly.

Dandy Bob was looking searchingly at Sholto Fitzhenry and he caught the sudden flicker in Fitzhenry's eyes. In that instant Bob glimpsed his hole card and knew it was his ace. "I ain't sayin'," he drawled. "But I'm workin' on the business, Jim. Remember—you said no questions asked."

"That's right," Frazee agreed. "No questions, Bob."

"You goin' home pretty soon, Mr. Fitzhenry?" Bob queried. "I'd like to see you if you are. Some things I want to know."

"I'm goin' home shortly," Fitzhenry answered. "Yes, I'll be there." He would not meet Bob's eyes.

"I'll see you then," said Bob. "So long, Jim." He walked on to the livery barn.

In the office of the Star Livery, which was also the stage stop, Dandy Bob sat down to think. He could hear Duggan out in the barn, giving orders to the hostlers. Duggan loved to boss the barn work, having once done it himself.

Dandy Bob smoked a cigarette and through the trailing haze of burning tobacco, studied the ceiling. If what he thought was right, Bob had a lot of answers.

"'An' no questions asked,'" Bob quoted softly. Then, raising his voice: "Duggan!"

In answer to the roar, Duggan thrust his head through the door. "Yeah?" he queried.

"Come along," Bob ordered. "We're goin' up to Fitzhenry's."

"Fitzhenry's?" Duggan could scarcely believe what he had heard. "Why, Bob?"

"Because," Dandy Bob stated, "I've got him out on a limb an' I'm goin' to saw it

off out from under him so he drops—hard."

Enroute to Sholto Fitzhenry's home on the Hill, Dandy Bob gave Duggan his orders. It was not necessary for Duggan to say a word; all he had to do was be present and obey his partner. Duggan promised faithfully to hold his silence, impressed by Dandy Bob's vehemence.

Bob rapped on the door of the Fitzhenry home and Luella Mae opened it.

"I'd like to speak to your husband," Bob announced.

"He won't—" Luella Mae began.

"If that is Mr. Roberts, bring him in," Fitzhenry called.

Surprise showing in her face, Luella Mae stepped aside. Bob and Duggan went in and met the master of the house.

"We won't need you, Luella," Fitzhenry said brusquely. "Come into the parlor, gentlemen."

In the parlor, with the door closed, Fitzhenry indicating chairs. "You wanted to see me?"

Bob had a twinge of admiration. Fitzhenry was a good poker player. "I did," Bob agreed. "You were at the meetin' last night when Frazee made the bank's proposition. I think you know why I'm here."

"I haven't the slightest idea," Fitzhenry said. "And I may as well tell you, Roberts, I was against employing you."

"Sure you were." Dandy Bob was bland. If Fitzhenry wanted to play it that way, Bob Roberts was agreeable. "I don't blame you for bein' against me. You knew I'd get the money back."

"But I *want* the money returned."

"Look," said Dandy Bob, "don't try that stuff with me. It won't work. You know an' I know that it was local talent that robbed the bank. Wait now—" He held up a hand to stay Fitzhenry's interruption. "Maybe the men who done the actual work wasn't local, but it was local brains directed 'em. I know where that money is, an' so do you!"

Old man Duggan squirmed and Bob favored him with a scowl. There was a flicker of apprehension in Fitzhenry's eyes. "You're insane!" he snapped.

"Nope." Bob shook his head. "Mr. Fitzhenry, the money's right in this house."

SHOLTO Fitzhenry jumped up from his chair. Bob's walnut handled Colt slid out into his hand and covered the banker. "Sit down!" Bob rasped. "Duggan, you hike on downtown. Get Jim Freeze an' Watson an' any more of the bank directors you can find. Bring Frank McMain. We'll search this place!"

Duggan moved to obey.

"Wait!" Fitzhenry gasped.

"Wait a minute, Duggan," Bob seconded. The Colt covered Fitzhenry. "You don't want the house searched?" He grinned wickedly at the banker.

"There's some way we can work this out," Fitzhenry said weakly. He sank down on a chair. "I didn't rob the bank, Roberts. I didn't take the money. I found it hidden behind my sofa. I swear I don't know how it got there."

"Who is goin' to believe that?" Bob rasped.

Sholto Fitzhenry stared at him. The answer to Bob's question had been troubling Sholto ever since he had discovered the loot.

"Nobody!" Dandy Bob answered himself. "Go along, Duggan."

Once more, obediently, Duggan stood up.

"Wait!" Fitzhenry said again. "Don't do that. There's some way we can work this out, Roberts. There's got to be a way."

"Sit down, Duggan," Bob ordered.

Duggan sat down. Dandy Bob stared at the banker. "I don't want to be hard on you," he said. "You're a married man an' likely you done it when you wasn't thinkin' straight. I don't really want you

hung or throwed in jail." Thoughtfully Bob Roberts tapped his teeth with the muzzle of the Colt. "Yeah," he said, lowering the weapon, "I'll try to help you out."

Fitzhenry lifted his head. His face was eager.

"Tell you what," Dandy Bob said thoughtfully, "you turn that money and stuff over to me. Jim Frazee said I was to get it back an' there'd be no questions asked. I guess I'm the only man in Gila City who could walk in on them directors, dump down the money, an' walk out again."

"Of course!" Sholto Fitzhenry jumped up, relief flooding his face. "And they will pay you for doing it. Four thousand dollars! Of course, Mr. Roberts! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Hold on a minute," Dandy Bob ordered. "The directors will pay me, sure, but this is worth a little somethin' to you, Fitzhenry. You don't get off scot-free."

The banker sat down slowly. "I haven't much money," he said. "I—"

"Not money," Bob interrupted. "There's other things, though. I don't like to pay eight percent a month on my loan. How about that?"

"That can be arranged," Fitzhenry agreed smoothly. "The monthly rate was a mistake. I'll change that."

"An' then," Dandy Bob drawled, "I wasn't asked to buy stock in the bank. It looks like that was a mistake, too. The directors voted you quite a little stock, didn't they? It didn't cost you a thing. How about splittin' with me, say for one dollar an' other good an' valuable considerations?"

Fitzhenry was silent for some time. Finally he nodded. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Not quite all." Dandy Bob was on the crest and he rode it. "Joe Glennen and Alice Moore are gettin' married. They're goin' on a weddin' trip an' likely they'll adopt a baby while they're gone. When they come home Mrs. Fennessy is goin' to give a party for 'em. You an' your wife will be invited an' so will everybody else. Seems to me you ought to go. The Widow's good people."

Again a long silence. Again Fitzhenry nodded.

"An' that's all," said Bob Roberts.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" the banker asked.

"You don't." Dandy Bob smiled cruelly. "But you can think it over."

Sholto Fitzhenry thought it over, recalling all the things he had heard about Dandy Bob Roberts. "All right," he said suddenly.

"Then," said Bob, "transfer the stock, fix up my note and mortgage, give me the sack, an' let me count the money. After that, Duggan an' me will pull out. We'll have to work this right. I'll have to leave town awhile to make it look good, but you needn't worry."

"No," said Fitzhenry slowly, "I guess that's right. I needn't worry." He got up and walked out of the parlor. Within minutes he returned, carrying Duggan's bulging grain sack.

One hour later, Duggan and Bob Roberts walked down the Hill. Duggan carried a sack and looked furtively from right to left. They reached the Widow Fennessy's and were admitted.

"Joe an' Alice are goin' to leave for San Francisco tomorrow," the Widow informed. "They'll be married there. They—What have ye there, Bob?"

"Something I want you to keep for me," said Dandy Bob. "Watch it, Violet, an' don't let anybody touch it. I'll be out of town a few days. An' Violet, figure to give Joe an' Alice a party when they get back. Send out your invitations an' be sure to invite the Fitzhenrys. Everybody will come."

"They will?" The Widow clutched

Bob's arm. "Ye're sure? Ye're positive?"

"I'm sure," replied Dandy Bob. "An' I'm not goin' to have to borrow any money from you, either. Thanks just the same. I'll pull out now. I got to catch the stage an' Duggan's goin' with me. Come on, Duggan."

With a final regretful look at the grain sack, old man Duggan followed Dandy Bob.

CHAPTER SIX

Fire-Water and Brimstone!

FOR one week Bob Roberts and his partner, old man Duggan, enjoyed the fleshpots of Tucson. The Old Pueblo welcomed the men from Gila City, entertained them, and then was glad to see them go. They returned to Gila City at night, and from the stage stop Bob went directly to Widow Fennessy's, there reclaiming his sack. Carrying the sack and followed by Duggan who was armed with a sawed-off shotgun, Bob sought out Jim Frazee. In the postmaster's home he dumped the sack on the table.

"There you are," said Dandy Bob. "Remember, no questions asked, Jim."

Jim Frazee peeked into the sack, gave a yelp of sheer pleasure and dashed out. Within half an hour the bank directors, including Sholto Fitzhenry, were gathered at Frazee's house. Bob stood by while money was counted, while papers and documents were hastily examined.

"It's all there," Frazee said at length. "Everything. Bob, you've saved our bacon."

Dandy Bob grinned. "You know," he stated, "I think I'd like to be in the bankin' business myself. I think I'll buy a little stock." His eyes were on Sholto Fitzhenry as he spoke. Fitzhenry grunted like a man hit low.

"An' now," Dandy Bob said, "me an' Duggan will pull out. We had kind of a rapid time, Jim. An' about that money we got comin: just split the reward in two and deposit half to me an' half to Duggan. Remember gents, if you get a new safe, me an' Duggan are in the freightin' business. We'll haul it for you." With old man Duggan trailing, Dandy Bob Roberts made his exit.

The recovery of the bank's money and documents was a nine days' wonder in Gila City. The citizens of that town gazed with awe on Dandy Bob Roberts. Bob had done it again, and if the bank had sense enough to employ such a man as he, maybe the bank was all right, too.

This supposition became a certainty when Gila City learned that by arrangement with Sholto Fitzhenry, Bob Roberts had become a stockholder in the bank. Accounts that had been withdrawn were reinstated. The bank was in the town's good graces again.

"They got a new safe ordered," Gila City said, "an' Dandy Bob's a director. Nobody's goin' to be fool enough to try to rob the bank again. Not with Bob Roberts to go against."

Duggan, of course, basked in reflected glory. He took plenty of free drinks and was asked plenty of questions, but Duggan maintained a discreet silence. Duggan was busy. The Widow Fennessy was giving a party, a reception for Joe Glennen and his wife who were expected shortly to return from their wedding trip to San Francisco. Violet kept Duggan trotting.

"She's got me runnin' till my tongue's hangin' out," Duggan told Dandy Bob. "Seems like them two ain't ever goin' to get here. I'll be glad when this party's over."

The Widow also spoke to Bob Roberts. "I'm countin' on ye, Bob," the Widow said. "Alice an' Joe will be back tomorrow, an' the reception's tomorrow night. Everybody's comin,' an' I'm countin' on ye to keep Duggan sober."

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"I'll try," Bob agreed.

He did try. Duggan, on hand with Bob and the Widow when the eastbound stage arrived, was sober as a judge. With the rest, he welcomed a beaming Joe Glennen, a blooming Alice. With Bob and the Widow, Duggan examined a sturdy two-year-old boy who stared back at him with round blue eyes.

Duggan behaved himself with care and as a reward was given the task of hauling the bride's trunk to the Widow's home. And that was a mistake. Duggan was out of Bob's sight for half an hour.

Still no one knew that a mistake had been made. The old man and the trunk arrived by dray and Duggan showed no evidence of anything wrong. True, there was a slight odor of cloves about him, but in the excitement of installing the Glennen family in the Widow's spare bedroom, this fact was overlooked. Also overlooked was the brief trip Duggan made between the dray and the Widow's back porch.

"You an' Duggan go get dressed now," the Widow urged Dandy Bob. "I want ye to mix the punch, Bob, an' I want ye on hand when me guests begin to come. Go on now."

BOB took Duggan with him as he departed. "You've done pretty good, Duggan," Bob praised when they were in the solitude of the adobe. "Just keep it up."

Duggan grunted. "What you goin' to put in the punch?" he asked.

"Champagne," Bob answered, "an' oranges an' lemons and grape juice." He glanced at his partner. "Why?"

"Just askin'," Duggan said innocently.

"Well then," Dandy Bob stated, "now that you know, shine your boots. You got to look nice tonight."

Back at the Widow's, while Bob mixed the punch, Duggan stood by. Shrouded in

one of the Widow's aprons, he squeezed lemons and oranges and watched champagne and grapejuice poured into the bowl. He stirred and tasted, he smacked his lips but ventured the comment that the punch lacked authority.

"It's just right," the Widow refuted, being called in to judge. "Now, Bob. come help me place the chairs. Duggan, bring the punch an' set it on the table in the parlor."

Bob followed the Widow and placed the folding chairs, borrowed from Billy Lister, the undertaker, and presently Duggan carried in the punch bowl.

"More in the kitchen," Duggan announced, placing the bowl carefully on the table. "Want I should bring the cake."

"I'll get it," the Widow answered.

The guests began to arrive just as final preparations were completed. Mr. and Mrs. Jim Frazee, Mr. and Mrs. Watson, Dr. and Mrs. Spier, Mr. and Mrs. Sol Finebaum: couple after couple arrived to shake hands with the Widow, to murmur polite congratulations to the bridegroom and felicitations to the bride.

Sholto Fitzhenry and Luella Mae came in, and all of Gila City's wealth and beauty was assembled, and still the party was not right. The men and their wives occupied folding chairs, they spoke small polite sentences, but constraint sat heavily upon the Widow Fennessy's cottage.

"They act like they was dead," the Widow whispered to Bob Roberts. "They ain't havin' a good time, Bob. They act like so many corpses, they do so. What'll I do?"

Duggan, standing beside his partner, made answer. "Why don't you serve the refreshments, Vi'let?"

"I guess that's right," Dandy Bob agreed. "Let 'em eat an' go home, Violet." Bob Roberts scowled, for he felt responsible.

And so, with Alice helping, the Widow

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served her guests, passing brimming cups of punch, serving angel food and devil's food cake. Plates and cups were accepted with polite aplomb. Cake was nibbled, punch sipped. Old man Duggan entered from the kitchen with a pitcher and replenished cups.

And now, wonderfully, life began to enter the party, masked faces relaxed, eyes began to glow, voices were less subdued and more brisk. Dandy Bob Roberts, the Widow, and Alice and her husband, the hosts and hostesses who had not been served, began to marvel.

"Looks like that was what they needed," said Dandy Bob to Duggan.

"Sure," said Duggan. "Punch."

"Punch!" said Dandy Bob, and hurried to the kitchen. One sniff, one taste was all he needed.

Duggan came in, his pitcher empty.

"Duggan," said Dandy Bob, "you spiked it! How much did you put in?"

"Four quarts," Duggan answered. "Didn't have no body to it before. Pretty good party, ain't it?"

It *was* a good party. Dandy Bob, observing from the kitchen door, saw Mrs. Finebaum in animated conversation with Alice. Fitzhenry, Watson, and Sol Finebaum stood with their arms around each other's necks, forming a line. "Come on, Bob," Watson called. "We need a bass."

THE Widow pushed through her guests and joined Bob in the door. Over in one corner Luella Mae Fitzhenry, skirt lifted to expose a length of ankle, was demonstrating a polka step to Frank McMains.

"Look at her," the Widow sniffed, "an' her so skinny that if she didn't have an Adam's apple, she wouldn't have no figger at all. Look at 'em all, Bob. What's got into 'em? What happened to 'em?"

"Duggan," Bob answered gently. "He happened to 'em. They're havin' a fine

time, Violet. They're enjoying themselves. You drink some punch too."

On the back porch, seated on the step, Dandy Bob Roberts found his partner. Duggan sat, arms resting on his raised knees, staring off into the night. "A waste of good liquor," said old Duggan, sensing his partner's nearness. "I done my best, Bob, but I can't get no kick outen that punch. Wish I had some whiskey."

Methodically, almost mechanically, he began to search his pockets. His hand came up holding a half pint bottle containing a little liquid. It was the nitroglycerin Duggan had taken, and forgotten until that moment. Gently, Dandy Bob Roberts took it out of Duggan's hand.

"Don't spoil it," he warned. "Joe an' Alice an' you an' me are the only ones that ain't drunk. It's a record, Duggan." Dandy Bob threw the bottle into the night.

There came a flash and a roar, a sharp shock of concussion. In the house the noises of the party suddenly ceased. Old man Duggan came to his feet to stare into the night, to turn and look, eyes wide with terror, at Dandy Bob Roberts.

"Whiskey!" old man Duggan gasped. "I been drinkin' that. I—My Lawd! Oh, my Lawd! Don't touch me! I got a quart of that stuff in me!" Old man Duggan's voice had ascended the scale as he spoke. Old man Duggan's face was gray with fright. Old man Duggan shivered, his legs gave way and for the first and last time in his life old man Duggan fainted.

And now, in the house, a babble arose. Men came boiling through the kitchen to learn the cause of the explosion.

"What was that? What happened?"

"I don't know," Bob Roberts answered. "I just don't know, Jim, but I think that Duggan's goin' to swear off drinkin'. You-all go back into the house an' enjoy yourselves."

THE END

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(Continued from Page 74)

bed. He felt her hands holding one of his. He heard her murmur very close, "It's over—all over. No one knows—no one but you and me. We'll keep it that way, always. Dan, do you hear?"

"I hear," he sighed, and opened his eyes again. The room was silent except for the faint sound of men's boots leaving. Dan looked up and saw Sheriff Ed Heafy.

"Doc'll be here in a few minutes, son," Ed said and smiled. "And your father's goin' to pull through."

Dan fought to find words. "Ed, I didn't dare tell you Fran—"

The sheriff nodded, his smile spreading and lighting up his ruddy face. "I knowed she was here, son. From the front door I had a good view of one end of the parlor. I seen her coat on the couch. Not only that, but I smelled gunsmoke.

"I had the house surrounded ten minutes after I left," Ed went on gruffly. "Might of knowed those killers'd pick the safest spot in town to hide—the house of the man they shot!"

"They had me," Dan breathed, "between a hard place and a damned rock!"

The sheriff bent over and there was a small glint of metal in his hand. He fumbled a moment at Dan's shirt, ignoring the sticky mess of blood on it. "That's your city marshal's badge," he said with a queer thickening in his voice. "You must of lost it—and I found it."

Dan's grin was shaky. "I feel good," he said. "I feel fine. On top the world."

Then he looked at Fran. She knelt beside him, holding both his hands now. Her dark eyes held on his and never wavered once and her smile was a steady warmth, like sunlight. Her face was very beautiful, and very abiding. He was tired now and he needed rest, and it gave him a good feeling to know that, when he awoke, she would be there still.

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